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OREGON

THE

SPORT

WITH A

SCAR

OR,

THE BEST MEN OF BRACE BOX.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "HANDS UP," "PINNACLE PETE,"
"HAIR TRIGGER TOM," "SNAPSHOT SAM,"
"PISTOL PARDS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GOOD MEN OF BRACE BOX.

"Good! Why, pard, that man's good ernuf ter be a missionary. Yer don't find many men yer kin call slouches hangin' out 'round Billy's; but, I tell yer, he's 'way up!"

The speaker was one of the old residents of Brace Box, called, when under reference, by the pleasant sobriquet of Happy Saul. His especial hearer was a new arrival, known only as Oregon. He was a tall, rawboned, rather roughly dressed man, with a broad scar on his face; who, however, created the impression that he was better than he looked.

In the two or three days that he had been in Brace Box this stranger had made several friends, and numerous acquaintances. He had also picked up the run of the various saloons

THE MAN WHO WENT OUT OF THE WINDOW WOULD HAVE FARED WORSE HAD NOT OREGON THROWN UP HIS HANDS, AS HE FELL.

and places of resort, from Billy's "Bower," to Kid Glove Hank's "Hole in the ground"; meantime taking stock of the various important personages of the town.

He had been doing it in a quiet, unobtrusive sort of way, so that Happy Saul really supposed his information was entirely unsolicited.

"He's one ov yer best men, yer say?" responded Oregon, looking unconcerned after the man of heavy build, who had passed with such a smooth, cat-like step.

"The best, stranger."

"Oh, call me 'Oregon.' Ef a feller's a stranger after bein' hyar three days, he may's well jump ther camp. It sounds like a bloody game ov a freeze-out."

"Ex-coose me, Mister Oregon. It's jest my way ov talkin'; but it don't mean nothin', yer understands. Ez I war sayin', though: ther ain't no deescount on ther face vally thar. He's Solid Sam, ther King-pin ov Brace Box an' ther best man thar, I tell yer. When he whissels, Kid Glove Hank, hisself, takes a back seat, tell Sam's through. Ain't it so, fellers?"

There were two or three other listeners, and to them the appeal was made.

The question appeared to be a perplexing one—not to any single man, but to the collective body. Doctors will differ.

"Yes, Saul, ye'r right," responded one, slowly. "He's good—mighty good. But, ez fur bein' ther best in Brace Box, that's suthin' else. He hits like ther kick ov a muel, an' fur sand he hez his own bigness; but, when yer says he's ther best, it shows yer ain't seen him 'longside ov Cold Card. He's blue lightnin'. Thar yer hev got a man."

"An' Kunnel Rollins lays over 'em both," interposed a third man. "Why, ding blast it, he runs ther town!"

"Then yer hev three chiefs hyar. Speak it slow, now, an' don't be playin' off on a orphan like me, ez generally, sooner er later, hez ter tackle ther biggest man in camp."

"Slow she are! Yer won't strike no better man in this hyar burg."

"He, he, he!" tittered another voice altogether. "Rollins ain't ther best man in town, ner Solid Sam, ner Cold Card. Yer best man, he, he, he! are leetle, teetle, teenty Paul Morrison, ez lives up ther gulch. Him an' his purty wife!"

Oregon looked around at the last speaker with more interest than he had yet shown.

"It takes two ov 'em ter make a man, don't it? I ain't heard ov him afore. What's his line?"

"Layin' low an' keepin' dark; he, he, he!"

Happy Sam broke in indignantly:

"Oh, dry up thar, Chestnut Chink. None ov yer fool-gabble. It's men we're talkin' about. Next you'll be wringin' in sum ov yer stories outen ther spellin'-book, an' make us all sick. You git, er hold yer hush."

"Ke-rect! I'll hold, an' you kin go on with yer b'ar stealin'. You'll see when ther tail breaks—he, he, he!"

It was hard to say whether he laughed from good nature, or from lack of sense. Most people in Brace Box, who had heard him talk, suspected that it was the latter. Oregon, who had just met him for the first time, was not so certain, in spite of his looks.

Chestnut Chink was slenderly built, awkwardly put together, knock-kneed and stoop-shouldered. In addition, he squinted—sometimes worse than others. Originally, he was known as Chink—Charley Chink—which was the name he gave at the date of his first appearance; but before he had been in camp a week his tendency to tell ancient stories, and laugh over them himself, caused him to be dubbed Chestnut.

From his general appearance one would be apt to suppose that the wrestle with fate for his daily hash was not over and above successful. He did odd jobs, that were none too well paid for, and lived in a little dug-out, some ten feet square, that he had built in a convenient bank near the edge of town. He loafed around a good deal, put in his word when he saw the chance, and occasionally slipped up to the bar along with a crowd. Even Happy Saul had very little patience with him.

"What sorter a man's this Morrison, anyhow?" asked Oregon. He had seen Colonel Rollins, Solid Sam and Cold Card, so that he could believe they were all good men without much urging. But this was the first time he had heard the name of Morrison, or any mention of a pretty woman, living up the gulch.

"He ain't ov much 'count except hevin' the best-lookin' woman in camp; an' that's what makes the oddness ov it. He's jest the hardest-lookin' pill in ther Box—Chestnut, hyar, 's no patchin' 'longside ov him. Looks ez though he mou't hev bin blowed up, er his face kinder scrubbed off with acky-fortis, er somethin'. Ter speak ov, thar ain't much face left."

"An' what's his biz?"

"Nothin' p'tickler, 'cept packin' grub. I dunno prezactly how he 'spects ter make a fortin', but he waggons on with ther rest. Reckon he counts ter git thar, some way."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a good deal of difference between the laugh of Oregon and that of Chestnut Chink.

That of the former rolled out in an honest, hearty way that did a man good to hear. He was amused to think that a man could expect a fortune to come to him in a place like Brace Box, and he showed it.

"Yes, that's what ther boys think; but they don't say it, 'long ov that wife ov hissen, which ther same are too nice ter be dragged round from pillar ter post. But mebbe some day they'll give him a hint; an' ef they do they'll do it strong. Ef she war a widder, now, she c'd pick an' choose. I dunno but what she c'd rake in Rollins hisself."

"Mebbe you'd like ter tell him that ter stir him up. He, he, he! How I'd like ter see ther cat 'bout ther time yer war puttin' that bell onter him."

"Dry up, Chestnut, er I'll baste yer one!"

Chink dodged from the raised hand and pointed down the street.

"Thar he are now. You tell him, an' I'll git reddey ter run. Ther best man in Brace Box. He, he, he!"

As Oregon turned away to look in the direction indicated, and as the bark of Happy Saul was always worse than his bite, except when he was actually crowded, the latter remained silent, while Oregon watched the bent figure of the dried-up man who hobbled along, as if to walk was both an effort and a pain.

"Seems ter hev hit yer 'bout whar yer live, pard," laughed Saul, at length, as Oregon once more looked his way. "Mebbe he's an ole side-pard ov yourn, an' you c'd reesk tellin' him w'ot I've bin sayin'."

"Nary pard ov mine—never ever see'd him afore, an' dunno ez I'll ever see him ag'in. This hyar burg ain't ekil to its repytashun, an' it ain't ha'dly wu'th while ter stay in it. Thar's no profit an' mighty leetle fun ter be got out ov stayin' hyar."

"Fun! Ef it's fun yer'er after, w'y don't yer go ter Billy's Bower an' shout? Kim along. I'm goin' thar now."

"Thanks. Mebbe I'll be 'long shortly, an' mebbe I won't. But I've got ther four best men ov Brace Box down so fine I'll know when ter chip, an' jest how heavy. So long, ole man. P'raps I'll see yer later."

Then Oregon strolled away, leaving Saul and the rest of them to their own devices.

When he had gone perhaps fifty yards he felt a pull at his sleeve.

Wheeling quickly, he found himself face to face with Chestnut Chink, who leaned toward him rather mysteriously.

"Say, Mr. Oregon, it war truth I war tellin' yer, honest Injun, deed an' double deed. Ther rest ov 'em hez ther spots, when they don't want ter be tickled, an' ef yer does, they kinder lose ther gripe. But that thar man ain't got no spots at all. You kin tetch him where yer have a mind ter, an' he don't mind it. That woman ov hissen knew w'ot she war doin' when she hung on. I kinder like yer style, so I give yer warnin'. Now, ef yer want ter browse round teenty Paul Morrison, you kin do it, an' I'll dig ther grave fur nothin'."

Chestnut Chink spoke rapidly and then skurried away as though he had been doing something disgraceful and wanted to run from the reputation of it. Oregon gazed after him thoughtfully.

"Mebbe that Morrison's a bad pill, an' mebbe he ain't. Ez I don't hanker fur him, 'tain't likely ter make much dif'ren's ter me; but, some ov these days, ef that Chestnut don't make some of ther boys walk Spanish, I'm jest a howlin' liar. Thar's a heap more sense toted 'round by them bandy-legs than they gives him credit fur. An' ef a feller's got sense, he's got all ther rest. Ef it war wu'th while ter stay, I'd try ter see him ag'in. Mebbe I will, anyhow. Now it's time I war reportin' at Jimmy's. Ef that pore boy don't get a word soon, he'll be all broke up."

"Jimmy's" was the name by which the best hotel in the place was known. Oregon did not stop there, but they knew him at the house already. When he came swinging in, Bower, the proprietor, nodded, and two or three others looked up in a recognizing sort of way.

"Mr. North about?"

Oregon asked the question in a matter-of-fact way, and was answered after the same style:

"He went out 'bout ten minutes ago. Didn't say whar he was goin', but 'pears ter me you'll find him down to ther Bower."

"Reckon, then, he's lookin' fur me. Ef he turns up, tell him to stay hyar tell I git back. I'm scoutin' fur him."

He spoke unconcernedly enough, turning away without any apparent haste or anxiety; but, when he struck the street, he was thinking to himself:

"What in thunder kin the boy be wantin' at Billy's? If it's a knob on his head, or an extra button-hole in his shirt-front, he'll be blamed apt ter git it ef I can't yank him out afore he gits mixed in with ther crowd. They're on'y thinkin' 'bout tacklin' me, but they're all ready ter go fur him fu'st sight. An' ther leetle angel he left back at Glory Gulch! What does he think 'll happen ter her ef he goes up ther flume?"

He quickened his steps.

By this time, business at the Bower, as well as at the other saloons, was getting under full swing. Nearly everybody on the street was in a hurry, so that if Oregon lengthened his stride, his haste would not be noticed.

As he came to the resort, he saw that something of interest was going on inside. There was a loud chorus of excited voices, the noise of several pistol-shots; and then a sudden hush. In the midst of it Oregon sprung through the door. If he had waited an instant, he could have come side by side with Colonel Rollins. As it was, the latter followed by a few paces.

CHAPTER II.

BILLY'S BOWER.

NEVILLE NORTH had been stopping at Jim Bower's house for several days. He came in the stage and made no inquiries of any kind that were not connected with the accommodations at the hotel. He was well dressed, but not after a style that would attract attention. There was nothing of the pronounced tenderfoot about him. He was good looking, but without being liable to be taken for a dude by any man of common sense. Altogether, he was just that sort of a young man who does not attract any particular attention; and who surprises no one, no matter what he turns out to be.

Jimmy Bower was not surprised when asked if there was not a place called "The Bower," or "Billy's Bower." He gave the simple directions needed, and thought no more about it until Oregon's question recalled it to his mind. Then he thought, if he did not say:

"It's a purty tough place for a stranger, and that's a fact. Mebbe I orter told him ter sing low till he got ther pitch ov ther times thar, an' ef he thort he couldn't kerry it along right ter ther notch, he'd better stay out. But, I guess he kin take keer ov hisself. He kinder looks that way."

Nevertheless, the toughness of the house was not so apparent when Neville sauntered in, keeping his eyes well about him, his face showing but careless unconcern.

The patrons of the house were well represented, and had got down to work as though they were there to stay. Those at the bar were hoisting the benzine in style, while a subdued hum of voices crept out through the broad curtain that hung at one end of the bar, where there was a doorway leading to the other room, which was the bower proper. In the bar-room, which was rather small for the amount of its patronage, there was a table or two, but no one ever thought of starting a game there for anything more serious than the drinks. The heavy playing was done in the larger apartment beyond.

North had no settled purpose in coming there, any further than to have a view of the men of Brace Box who patronized such places, and perhaps to find Oregon. He certainly was not in anxious quest of either an eye-opener or a game, though he had no particular scruples about either.

The way to the bar was open, and he found himself in reaching distance without question or interference. The young man who handed out the glasses looked at him inquiringly.

"Good-evening, John! Can't you introduce me to somebody? It's neither pleasant nor healthy to drink alone."

At Neville's smiling question the bartender nodded knowingly and turned to three men who were standing at the other end of the counter.

"Sam, here's a gentleman and a stranger, that don't like to drink by himself. Can't you join his party?"

It was a little more than Neville bargained for, but he accepted the situation and moved forward a step or two as he said: "North is my name, gentlemen. What will you have?"

The three were looking sharply at him; the one addressed as Sam acted as spokesman.

"My name is Ryan. This are Ben Gunn, an' this Lanty McGuire. Some ov 'em call me Solid Sam, moreover; but, you kin take yer choice. We don't gen'rally try ter wringin', er play roots on strangers. Ez you've asked us up fur p'liteness' sake, we'll stay with er fur ther round. Ef yer pan out well when we've see'd more, we'll tell yer ef you kin hitch on ter tie."

"And of course you'll take whisky," laughed North, not at all abashed by the formal address, nor awed by the name of the man.

"I've never been in here before, and it is more than likely I won't be in again. While I am here I suppose you'll find me up to the average, and about as white as they make them. Nothing like sounding your own bazoo, don't you know?"

"The average runs pretty high at Billy's," was the sober response, as Sam elevated the vial, and dashed a liberal supply of the ardent into his glass.

"Oh, I don't mean the average at the Bower. From what I hear of it I couldn't reach it. But, the average of mankind, by and large, as the sailors say. Here's to us!"

Everybody nodded, the tumblers were emptied, and North followed up his friendly advances, by drawing out his cigar case and handing it around. By the time the four weeds were lit, Neville recognized that there was no foretelling what was

going to come; but that he had got himself in for it, whatever it might be.

"Reckon you're a stranger, wantin' ter see what's what in Brace Box, but not jest prezactly keerin' ter go it alone?"

"You've hit it off nice, the first throw," was Neville's prompt answer to the question of Solid Sam. "I came to have a look at the camp, and I can't see much of what it's like promenading the streets by daylight. If I like the place I may put some money in the town; at the same time I don't want to pay too much for the chance to make up my mind on its merits."

"All right! If you've nothing much to do we'll show yer 'round, a bit. We'll see, first, what's goin' on in the Bower."

"Smoking allowed there, eh?"

"Solid Sam's allowed, an' ther rest don't count. Guess we ain't goin' ter throw away cabbage leaves like them."

Without more ado he led the way behind the curtain, therest following.

"Bedad," whispered Lanty McGuire. "Ef Solid Sam says praties is peas who's goin' ter say they ain't? He'd wrack ther room fur less than that."

North's mind was set at ease, however, by seeing that half a dozen occupants of the room were smoking pipes, and that no notice was taken of them.

Certainly, things were moving along in the Bower.

Half a dozen card tables were going, with from two to six players at each; while, at the further end of the room, a dozen men were bucking against a large sized and very ferocious tiger that Billy kept for his own profit and the amusement of his visitors.

"Bank wins again," howled one disconsolate man, as he saw his last dollar swept away with the same calm smile that the dealer wore when, a moment before, he gathered in a hundred.

"Bank allers wins when I buck it. Never see'd ther lucky cusses ez wins ter even things up an' make ther gen'ral av'ridge even."

"Oh, come now, Charley, bank don't always win. It's a kind of see-saw arrangement. One minute the bank's 'way ahead, but, when the evening's over you don't see its pile of chips much bigger than when it started. We do sometimes take a big pot from one man; but then we always sling it around among a dozen. Why, it wasn't three weeks ago that you were just a 'hoopin' over the way you cleaned us up. Try it ag'in and see if they don't come your way."

This from the dealer, who was correct in his last statement. The grumbling player had broken the bank a little time ago, though he seemed to have forgotten all about it. He shook his head, with a growl.

"Thankes! I don't bite worth a cent. If I wanted to I couldn't. Havn't got a dime and won't have till the next clean-up. Good thing I haven't, too. Don't want ter lose another at yer' blamed old table."

Neville North stood right at the grumbler's elbow. As the man moved aside he slipped into his place. There were ten dollars' worth of chips in his hand, and he turned enough to see Solid Sam as he said with a laugh:

"Look out for me, pard—it's halves."

"Go in an' win!" was the reply. "I'll see yer through."

The brief conversation called attention to North about as much as if he had jumped on the table, and shouted that he was a chief. It said that whether he was Ryan's friend or victim he was the wrong man to meddle with just then. The dealer looked him over as he put down a dollar on the queen, and thought at the ordinary rate of progress from such a beginning it would be some time before his coin would require much attention. When the bets were made he pulled three turns in slow succession before the gentle lady appeared on Neville North's side, and he was richer by a dollar.

"I'll stay by her, I suppose. It's a shame to throw a lady over as long as she smiles at you, and I know she's struck on me, bad. My luck is running high."

As he spoke he pushed over to the painted damsel four more of his checks, in addition to the two that were already lying there.

It seemed as though he was not far wrong about his vein. The queen smiled on him once more, just before the last turn.

Then he gathered up his checks and shook his head as the dealer looked at him inquiringly.

"No, thanks! It takes four big brains all rolled into one to try and call the turn—and then not get within a mile of it. I'll stay out till the next time."

The next deal Neville put all of his chips except one on the ace, and put a copper on the top.

"It stands to reason a man can't win every time, and I may as well be getting ready to lose."

"If that's what you call losing, I'd like to know what show the bank's going to have?"

"All it can get on a square deal and a reasonable limit. And, by the way, I didn't ask what the flyer was. Something liberal, I suppose?"

"Two hundred and fifty is the usual thing. Just now I don't know whether we ought to cut

it down to ten, or let it run wideopen. Depends on how you're going to bet. That shoestring of yours is beginning to string out."

The tone of the dealer was sarcastic, but it didn't trouble North a particle. He watched his little pile of chips with just a shade more than ordinary interest, and let the dealer have the cards to himself.

"Ace wins."

"Ace loses."

"Split, by thunder!"

"He must know the cards by name, and sleep under the table at night."

Quite a number were watching the young man's game, and the remarks were audible all around, though there was nothing he could take offense at, nor did he show any signs of being troubled. On the contrary, he settled down as though he was just beginning to enjoy the game.

"Hit 'em ag'in, an' hit 'em hard," whispered Solid Sam. "Tommy's scared, and he knows my mouth's set fer a square deal. If you've got any luck to back yer judgment, we'll make 'em put up ther shutters afore ther night's half over."

"What I was thinking, pard. Get me a couple hundreds in chips and we'll begin to climb."

Without hesitation, and just as though it was a matter of course, he handed his pocketbook to Ryan, meantime removing the copper that had been on his checks on the ace, backing the card straight to win.

Slowly Tommy pulled the cards, but in its own good time came the ace in the door, and that for the player's side. It began to look like fate.

And then came the sound of a wild hubbub—voices, pistol-shots, feet hurrying to and fro in the outer room, toward which every man around the table turned.

"Hold hard, all of you!" shouted the dealer. "It's just some fool horse-play of the boys, and will be over in a minute."

All the same, he had his revolver out, and was looking keenly at the curtain, while a couple of his heelers, with their weapons drawn, as anxiously watched the table.

Then, with a perfectly marvelous celerity, every light in the room went out, and in the black darkness that followed, North felt an arm of iron lock around his neck, in a hug that speedily produced insensibility.

CHAPTER III.

A MISSING MAN.

WHEN Oregon had stepped through the outer doorway of the Bower, he found out, for the first time, that the place was enveloped in darkness.

It made the situation a dozen times more ticklish for a comparative stranger. The Irishman's receipt for a proper course of action in a row was known well enough to the sport with a scar, but it did not here apply. It was all right to tell a man to hit the first head he saw; but though there were heads enough within reach, not one of them could be seen. There was a momentary deadlock, until Billy, or some of his subordinates, could throw a light on the subject.

No one cared to strike a match.

That would make that particular striker visible, and leave the balance of the Bower as dark as ever.

The silence that followed the extinguishing of the lights could not last long. It was broken by a cry from the further room:

"Bring a light quick, Billy! They've left us out in the dark, an' by ther heavens! they're tryin' ter tap ther bank."

There was one thing about Billy's house that explained, when known, the feasibility of plunging the whole place in darkness. It was lighted by a gas made on the premises from gasoline. Ordinarily it gave a better light than either kerosene or candles.

When the darkness came, Billy knew exactly what was the matter. Some one had shut off the gas.

Although he thought it was only a rough joke, he was in haste to turn it on again, letting the racket take care of itself.

He found the task more difficult than he had expected, but succeeded in a time not half as long as it seemed. It was fortunate that he was there. He knew how to go to work, while one of his cappers, who had started at the same time that he did, would have taken half an hour to get ready, and then, in his excitement, might have blown the whole place up.

Leaving the subordinate on guard, Billy started out to illuminate, calling as he did so:

"Try the lights, somebody! And everybody shoot at the first man they see run. If this is more than a joke, there'll be some dead meat on the floor."

"Hyar's a gerloot tryin' to run now! I've got him by the short hair, an' I guess I kin hold him."

It was Oregon that spoke.

Just as Billy shouted his caution, some one made an effort to dart for the door, and landed right in the sport's arms.

"Hold him, then! He may only be a cotton-

tail; but we want a glimpse of him, anyhow."

Now that it was understood that the burners were in order, half a dozen matches were struck, and in an instant almost the place was as bright as ever, with every one looking curiously in the direction of the voice they had just heard.

Billy gave a growl of disappointed wrath and disgust, and rushed for the other room—matches in one hand and revolver in the other—while there was a chorus of laughter from the careless lips that would be ready to howl a moment later. With his wrists gathered in one hand, his ankles in the other, Oregon was holding the squirming figure of Chestnut Chink.

"That's yer bloody bank robber!" rose the cry, though it was not hard to tell that it was all in jest.

"Where's that rope Billy keeps fer Judge Lynch! Kerry him out an' swing him to ther ridge-board! He's ther bloody robber thet's b'in doin' all this shootin'. Look at ther cold meat lyin' 'round loose!"

In fact, there was no cold meat, nor were there any wounded in sight. Nearly every one thought the whole thing had been a joke, engineered by some of the sports who were willing to take the risk.

Oregon gave a snort of disgust and a toss to the squirming Chestnut. Without waiting to see where the lad landed, he pushed on into the Bower, just as it was once more illuminated.

"There, too, there was a disposition to laugh. The conversation in the outer room had all drifted in, and as far as heard from, nobody had been seriously hurt out there; while at first glance everybody seemed to be standing around the table as when the light went out.

Certainly, the funds of the bank remained untouched, for the dealer and his cappers stood over them with their revolvers in hand; and a very ridiculous figure they cut.

"All present an' accounted fer," smiled Tommy Dodly.

"Not much of a frolic, after all."

He glanced keenly around, however, trying to discover if possible, in the faces he saw, some suspicious look.

"Oh, we're all hyar, Tommy, an' jist ez innercent ez spring lam's. You'll hev ter stir 'round in ther bar-room ter find who put up ther job; an' Billy kin do that while you go on with ther deal."

"You dry up on that nonsense, Tom Longly. Ther's suthin' rotten, after all. What I want ter know is, *whar's my pard?*"

It was Solid Sam that was speaking, and he talked as though he meant business.

"What's got into you, Sam? Hyar's yer pards, three er four ov 'em, all lyin' 'round loose."

"I mean Mr. North, ther young man ez come in with me. I've bin standin' behind him all ther time tell jest now. It's blamed queer whar he went."

"Got skeered an' slipped, don't yer think?"

"He'd bardly hev slipped an' left—but that's no matter. Did arybody see him go?"

"We didn't see much of ary thing else, did we, Sam?"

"Say, you, Jones! How did he git outer thar 'thout yer knowing when he went?" asked Ryan, without noticing the jest. "McGuire, you and Gunn take a sharp look outside. There's a job of some kind put up, but I'd like ter know ef it's on him, er me. Ef it's on him—an' I generally claim ter know a half white man when I see him—ef it ain't too late, I'll see him over ther rifle. An' ef it's on me—Solid Sam gits even! Speak up, Jones! What do you know about ther racket?"

Sam Ryan showed that he was in earnest, and Jones would have been very willing to explain if he had only known how.

"Pon my soul, Sam! All I know is he war thar when ther lights went out; an' he warn't thar when ther war lit."

The mysterious is worse than the tragic.

The house had begun to understand that the disappearance of Neville North was singular. If he had been found on the floor he would have been laid out in fashionable style, (for Brace Box,) and the game would have gone on. As he was not to be found at all the game became a matter of no importance, especially when Solid Sam was asking questions, with a shade of suspicion in his tone.

The more questions asked the more inexplicable it all appeared. Gunn and McGuire found not a trace of North outside, and a clamor of voices arose.

"Jest one holy minnit," interrupted Ryan.

"Can ary one tell me whar he hung out?"

"Bower's," suggested some one.

"All right. You fellers kin rustle 'round, an' I'll go down thar an' see ef he's come in."

As Solid Sam passed out, Oregon fell in behind him, following pretty closely until they were beyond ear-shot distance of the Bower. Then he ranged up alongside.

"Guess you'll be willin' ter count me in with yer on this hyar search. North war my pard, too; an' ef he hedn't bin huntin' me it's ten ter six he'd never thort ov lookin' at ther inside ov Billy's. I think I got ther heft ov ther cries,

but there's maybe a card or two I didn't ketch on to. Kin yer tell me ary reason why ther boy might 'a' left?"

"Nary reason; an' thar was jest a thousand why he should 'a' stayed. I've got 'em right thar, an' I'll take keer ov 'em tell he gits back er thar's an exceketer in sight."

Sam slapped his breast as he spoke, and Oregon understood that there had been some transaction between the two that the rest had not been aware of.

"Yes, sir-ree! He played me fur white, an' you kin bet Solid Sam never threw off on *that* kind unless they got ter slingin' on airs. He'd jest put his wallet in my paws ter buy him a stack of checks when the lights went out. I never heered ov any skull-duggery ez Billy played, but thar's a gang that hangs out thar that might hev gone fur ther boy ef they knowed he hed rocks. How they c'u'd git at him right thar in ther crowd's more ner I could tell."

"Couldn't 'a' hustled him outen ther winder?" inquired Oregon, more concerned for North's own fate than the fate of North's cash.

"Yer ain't bin notissin' ther Bower very clost, er yer wouldn't ask. Thar ain't a winder ter ther back room, an' on'y ther one door. When a sport gits cornered thar he's got ter stay. It *mou'd* be ez he took ther trail fur home. Ef he did I want ter know. Ef he didn't they'll find Solid Sam movin' 'round."

"Jest ez yer say—I s'pose you'll count me in along with yer?"

"Put her thar, pard; an' we'll do ther balance ov ther talk arter we see how ther game's bin runnin'."

The two men shook hands in a solemn sort of way, and then, without another word, started for the hotel. It was hoping against hope—especially for Oregon—and neither was much surprised to find that Neville North had not been seen at Bower's place, and that his room was empty.

"That settles it. Thar's bin foul play. Ther blamed gerloots! They're tryin' it on *my* pard. I'll show 'em who's ther best man in Brace Box, don't yer disremember. Say! Your pard warn't a detective, war he? It don't make no differ'n's ter me—I'm squar' ef I'm tough—but I want ter know ter figger it out a leetle."

"No detective in hissen. Jest a squar', gritty leetle piece of man flesh, able ter hoe his own row, that come down ter Brace Box a-lookin' fur a missin' tenderfoot—a cousin ov hissen which, I reckon, are gone over ther range. I met him driftin' through ther camp, an' come along down, fur he'd got on a kinder trail ez p'inted fur Brace Box."

"His cousin's name?" asked Sam, thoughtfully. There was something about this information that interested him especially.

"Cyril North war his genooine handle; but ther trouble are ter git at what he went ter supper by out hyar. From what my pard said I kinder fancy he ain't keenin' ter mention his name any too often, so, yer see, that made ther contract a leetle heavier."

"He don't allow ter send him ter prison ef he finds him, er any sich?"

"Not very much! Wants ter put a cold half million in his hands, that he don't keer ter keep hisself."

"That's ther sort! I tell yer, I like ther boy all over—better most like, than he'd care fur me. I'll do my level best, which are promisin' a heap. I kinder think, if he kin handle sich big money, an' ain't too much in his pockets, thet they won't kill him right erway. Ef they leave him livin' we'll hev him afore we git through."

"But who yer think hes him?"

"That's tellin'; but, thar's a gang somewhar. Now, we'll go back ter Billy's ag'in. He may turn up yit. Ef he don't, we'll mebbe find tracks. Keep yer mouth shut—I've bin blowin' too much meself—an' yer eyes open. Like ez not they'll try us a fly fur good luck, ter see ef they can't git us outen ther road."

"Jist so I don't kill yer friends. I hev'n't hed any real fun fur a coon's age. Ef I c'u'd on'y feel sure I war gettin' on ter a gang ez laid fur North, I'd tackle ther hull town on a chance!"

"Lay low, pard, ef yer wants ter git thar. What I'm wantin' ter know are, *how* they got away with him. I c'u'd tell, then, who did ther trick."

In due time they reached the Bower; but Neville North had not been heard from; and by this time the crowd was thinking of something else.

CHAPTER IV.

A QUEER COMPANION—GADLEY'S GANG.

"Ef I war you, miss, I'd wait. Ther men hyar ain't no saints; but ef yer happen ter git back from Brace Box livin', you'll think 'em all angels. Reckon Mr. North'll be 'round in a day er so, ef yer don't hear from him."

The landlord of the Standard Hotel spoke in thorough earnest, though not at all for the purpose of putting money in his pocket. Miss Viola North was handsome, a lady, and just from the remote East. She was not the style of person to be traveling alone toward Brace Box.

The road thitherward was not only long, but difficult and dangerous. The thread of a trail

led over the mountains. At times the wayfarer found himself uncomfortably near to the edges of precipices, and at other times the wandered through the favorite lairs of "Captain Gadley's Gang."

That was the name by which the road-agents who collected the tolls on the route were known. Very desperate men they were, who turned up just when least expected, and least wanted. As they had been quiet for some time the chances were they were about ready for another dash.

Miss Viola had heard all about them, and all about the dangers of the road, but nothing could stop her. She left the bulk of her baggage at the Standard, thanked the burly proprietor of the house, climbed into the rickety old stage, and started on her way rejoicing.

Miss North had made no particular inquiries concerning the passengers, and had thought very little of them. Her mind was fixed on Brace Box; the ways and means of getting there troubling her but little.

When the stage was fairly under way, however, she was not altogether charmed at the prospect. There was only one passenger inside, who was puffing away quite industriously at a long cigar, the smoke from which curled up from under the broad brimmed, white hat that was drawn forward with a rakish slant. As she settled into her seat this individual nodded, and said in rather a pleasant tone:

"Howdee? Reckon on goin' fur on this line?"

"To Brace Box."

The answer was curt, and not very genially spoken.

"Live 'round thar I surmise?"

"No, sir; only traveling."

"Ah, suthin' like meself. Heerd tell on it an' want ter see ef she pans out ekil to her reper-tashun. You kin bet she does, though. You'll find her a town on wheels. Travelin' alone, be yer? Any friends thar?"

"Relatives there."

"That is, they war there when last heerd from. Don't gamble on ther bein' thar now. Awful place to kill off strangers, an' ole settlers are skeerce. I'm alone meself, an' it don't seem ter kinder go right. I'm little, but I'm good, jest real good ter tie to. What's ther matter with you an' me bein' pards, ef yer friends happen to hev wandered over ther range when we git thar?"

"Sir?"

Viola was quite matter of fact, and had thought herself able to take things as they came; but she got as much indignation into that one word as if she had spoken several dozen.

"Ain't hard ov hearin', be yer? I thort I said it slow, an' purty toler'ble clear. It's ov no consequence, though. I jest thort you an' me'd make a rattlin' pair ov pards ef you're ez good ez yer look."

"And I, sir, do not care to talk to you. If you cannot allow me to journey unmolested I will go outside and throw myself on the protection of the driver."

For answer, the passenger burst into a clear, ringing laugh, that had very much of the feminine about it.

"There, there! I'll be mum as a church mouse. I know it was an outrage, but I *couldn't* resist the temptation to take a rise out of you. Bless you're soul, I'm Merry May, and very much at your service. I don't know that my costume is much of a recommendation to a young lady from the East; but I assure you that if the truth were known, I am a very good individual to tie to, as I said before."

Viola was surprised. She had not entirely conquered her indignation, but at the sound of that genial, laughing voice, that seemed to belong to a girl of some education, and possibly some refinement, she felt a good deal more at her ease, and turned to see what she looked like.

The broad-brimmed hat was pushed back now, revealing a pleasant, even a handsome face; brown eyes, twinkling with mirth; a rosebud mouth over a squarely-fashioned, resolutely-built chin. On her forehead lay a line of short, crisp brown curls, while her complexion was none too dark for a typical brunette, though it had evidently been deepened somewhat by Western winds and sunshine.

"Some folks think I look charming in this outfit," continued Merry May, as Viola looked her over curiously, and without a word.

"I should judge that it is no great recommendation to you, but you can't always tell from the outside, and as I had no idea of a *tete a tete* with one of my own sex, I dressed for business from the word go. I've got all my cash capital with me, and I don't propose to be held up by anything less than a gang—and it's got to be a mighty good gang at that. It don't look quite so odd to see a set of sixes belted on over a pair of breechaloons."

She glanced toward her waist, and Viola, following the direction of the look, saw that a brace of revolvers hung at her hips.

"Do you really expect to use them?"

It was the first thing that came to Miss North's lips, and was just as good to begin with as anything else would have been.

"Can't say that I've thought much on the subject, but I can assure you I know how. It's the first thing a party in business out here has

to learn, and it don't do to get out of practice, either."

"I think, then, that I should prefer to stay out of business."

"That's so; but, when one has been born and bred into a trade, and followed it for a time, it's not always so easy to retire. Some of these days, maybe, I'll be able; but for the present I protect myself, and manage to make a living. I'm going down to Brace Box on a professional excursion. There are some big games there, and I want to see what Charley Coldcard knows about draw."

"You are a gambler, then?"

"Bless your soul! you have more wisdom than I gave you credit for. Yes, in cold fact, that is the size of it. Of course, I don't expect to bother you after we get there; but there's no reason why we should not journey along quite amicably. I set you down as a woman of sense the moment I put eyes on you. It may be that I can do you some service, too. If I can, command me. I fancy you are new to the ways of this land, while I know them like a book."

"Perhaps," answered Viola, thoughtfully.

A character like Merry May was a novelty to her—in some respects a disagreeable one. Yet there was something about the female sport that attracted her. Under other circumstances she might have turned away in disgust or horror. Here and now her appearance was almost welcome.

"If you would promise me one thing, I think I should feel very much less afraid of you."

"Afraid! Come, now! That's tipping it tolerably steep. I didn't know that I was such a desperate-looking case. One thing? What is it? I'll cheerfully promise a dozen."

"But a dozen would be harder to remember than one. You might think you were doing very well keeping eleven of them, and the twelfth, that you forgot, would be, to me, the most important of all."

"You're a woman yourself, and know just how it is. The one thing, then, I'll promise, but I won't *swear* to it till I know what it is. Of course it's something about a man?"

"The guess is shrewder than I expected. I have a young relative, under whose protection I am supposed to be traveling. I expect to join him again at Brace Box. He is naturally a gambler, and, as a matter of fact, an unlucky one. Promise me that you will not win his money."

"Done! What's his name?"

"Neville North."

"All right! Mr. Neville North is henceforth safe from my fascinations, so far as the card-table goes. I seldom play with any but professionals; and when I can afford it, look after the bigger game—try to skin the skinnors. I shall let him severely alone."

The ice was broken between the two, and their conversation went on for some time without flagging, though it now took a more general turn. Viola did not care to say much to a stranger about her present mission; while Miss May, in such company, did not feel like airing her own past life or future prospects. In the course of an hour or two they had become almost intimate, and though after that the conversation flagged for a season, yet it was renewed from time to time, as a subject suggested itself to one or the other.

"By the way, you said something about road-agents—a gang of them. Were you in earnest about our being likely to meet them?"

Miss Viola asked the question after a little spell of silence.

"Very much in earnest. In fact, I shall be somewhat surprised if we do not. Somehow they manage to have pretty accurate intelligence when there are pilgrims on the road worth the plucking. I'm not given to nerves myself, as you can possibly imagine; but I confess I did hesitate about striking out on this trail."

"But are—are they violent? Do you think that we, as unprotected females, have anything to fear?"

"A rather healthy old unprotected female I appear to be!" responded May, looking down her costume toward her revolvers.

"Gadley's Gang, as they are called, are not too good for almost anything imaginable. They don't exactly want to make the country too hot to hold them; but if they don't tone down a little they'll get there just the same. I prefer to keep them at the small end of my sixes, anyhow. I take it, they're after coin; but could manage to wagon along without it if they saw they couldn't get it."

"You mean?"

"They're not trying to draw blood out of a turnip, or any such nonsense. If they saw the unprotected female had no wealth, or that they couldn't get it without bloodshed, they'd be apt to pass till it got around to them again."

"And if we meet them; what do you intend to do?"

"Bluff like blazes, as long as I have a say-so, and then show a full hand."

She leaned forward as she spoke, with rapid earnestness, drawing her revolvers with illustrative speed, her glance going toward the road on the side she was riding. The weapons were

just at a level when a harsh, rasping voice croaked:

"Han's up, Jimmy! Turn a spoke, an' you bet yer croak."

"Han's are up," returned Jimmy the driver.

"You jest got er puddin'. 'Hoop in yer work so I kin hustle along. This hyar cargo are like a short hoss, an' you kin curry it jest too quick."

"Yer keep yer han's up, and yer blame mouth shut tell some 'un wants yer ter chipper. This are all our say-so, an' I reckon we kin find out the vally ov our hand. Now, then, you inside! What yer goin' ter do?"

"I think we have got you, Mr. Gadley," was the swift retort.

"Whether we have or whether we haven't don't make any difference. I'm going to shoot anyhow. You move and you're dead."

The man outside at the window did not understand about the coincidence, and it seemed to him that the drop had been caught on him quicker than he could think. It was a sure thing that if the revolver looking him in the face should go off, he would go down.

Nevertheless he made the best of an awkward position.

"Yer don't give us much chance ter put on ther perlite line ov frills. When yer come at us that ways we hev ter talk with ther bark on from ther word go. I'll jest hev ter take my chances, an' the rest ov ther boys 'll clean up ther hearse. Pitch them shooters out, an' step down an' out, er they'll be a dead young man afore you kin count twenty."

"I'd be willing to bet two to one that the dead young man won't be on the inside then. Come, now, I'll gamble four to one that if you press this game you die. Hands up, you, or down goes your building."

"Up they are, my son; but you are laying up a heap of trouble fur that lady with yer in ther coach, ter say nothin' ov yerself. Thar's half er dozen ov ther boys got er bead on ther coach, an' ez soon ez they see thar's no chance fur me, they'll begin ter punch it full ov holes. Thar's jest one thing dead sure; I won't go over ther range alone. I ain't keerin' fur you, an' I don't kick fur myself. But I feel jest too sorry for ther young lady ez are along with yer."

"Don't worry about her, but confine your regrets to yourself, in case you are going to try to interfere. Say, there, you Jimmy! Lay on the braid, and take us through. It's no use to be fooling around here!"

As Merry May's voice to the driver rung out, the road-agent's voice was also raised.

"Take 'em, boys! I'll run ther chances!"

The words were not well out of his mouth when Merry May's pistol cracked. At the same time there was a rush on the other side of the coach, a chorus of yells, and a violent plunge, as Jimmy, with more courage than he had been receiving credit for, brought his whip down in a long, stinging sweep, that touched leaders and wheelers alike.

The man at the door had his hands already up. At the shot he simply pitched stiffly to the ground. Before he touched it a stream of fire began to pour out of the other window, to which May had turned the instant she first pulled trigger.

The defense was not an instant too soon. The outlaws had been creeping up on the unprotected flank, and several hands were reaching for the door when Jimmy started his teams.

It was touch and go, but the stage rolled on, two or three men dropped away from it with shrieks or groans, as Merry May, cool as an iceberg, sent them crashing down, and as the speed of the horses increased to a mad run, under the vigorous application of the whip, there was only one chance for the discomfited road agents.

That chance two or three of them were anxious to take. They were already raising their hands, when up from the ground sprung the spokesman, who had fallen at May's first fire.

"Hold hard thar, all ov yer! Ther fu'st man that picks trigger goes ter kingdom glory! Yer hear me speakin'?"

In front of them all he rushed with outstretched hands, and a mad look on his countenance, such as they did not care to face.

"Thar ain't coin ernuf in ther outfit ter pay fur ther wuth ov ther gal ef anything happened to her. Hold yer hush, now; our time'll come by an' by."

The road-agents slunk back and the stage dashed on. For once Captain Gadley had missed in his swoop; but he or his representative was willing to bide his time.

CHAPTER V.

NEVILLE NORTH IS HEARD FROM.

THE stage went bounding along at a rate that would have baffled the pursuit of any one not well-mounted. The horses were so near to making a clean runaway that at the end of a mile or so Jimmy became more anxious to check their speed than to distance the outlaws. He pulled steadily on the reins, gradually increased the pressure of the brake, and spoke in what he intended should be a soothing tone.

To his relief the horses yielded to his control just in time to slacken their pace before reach-

ing a dangerous turn in the road, though they went around the Devil's Bend at rather an uncomfortable speed.

"Very well done, Jimmy!" said the voice of Merry May, and that young lady looked out at the window.

"Make your schedule now. Bring us into Brace Box safely on time, and I'll see that you're a century better off for the risks you ran. It's not every driver that would have answered up as you did."

"Thankee, marm," answered Jimmy, without looking down.

"They say we fellers ain't willin' fur to do nothin' but drive. Dog-gone 'em, we're ready ter do our level best ef we sees a show; but thar ain't no sense in gittin' plugged fur nothin'. I've got me han's full jist now, an' can't do much talkin', but I'll tell yer more what I thinks later on. I won't say I'll earn it, but if yer goin' ter give a widdered orphin, wo't's lost his wife, a extry hundred when yer 'rives safe at Brace Box, all I've got ter say are, you bet you'll git thar. Stiddy now, will yer? Glang!"

Jimmy's attention returned to his team, while Merry May's went back to her companion in the coach.

Miss North had remained very quiet and somewhat pale throughout the trouble with the road-agents. She was unused to such scenes, and did not know how to lend a helping hand. But she understood that Merry May had beaten off the attack, and so expressed the gratitude she felt.

"That's all right. It was number one I was looking after, all the time. They were the easiest gang to handle that ever I saw. It strikes me they were a little too easy. There was no one killed, or even very badly wounded. If they had had it in fer us at all bad, and had the pluck of a mouse, they could have got away with our luggage in style."

"You will hardly blame them for letting us get away?" asked Viola, with a smile.

"No; but it looks confounded bad. They're not the chaps to be scared off by a few flesh wounds. They were looking after your safety—or mine. Confound them! I wish I knew which one they were after! You can bet a dollar, and be safe as a church if you wager that one or the other of us will see them again, and that before very long. You don't know of anybody in Brace Box willing to pay big money to keep you from getting there?"

"With the exceptions of Neville and a man who goes by the name of Oregon I am afraid I know no one at all there; and I certainly cannot see how any one could know me, much less be interested in causing my absence. No, no! I believe it was simply an attempt at plunder. When they found that there was more danger than dollars they fell back."

May looked at the speaker a little sharply as she listened, but did not utter the words that were on her tongue. On the contrary she laughed carelessly and snapped her finger and thumb.

"Easy as that, wasn't it? And they call Captain Gadley a thoroughbred! My, oh my! What a joke on the boss ruffian; Jimmy will just do himself proud in the telling of it; and I wouldn't wonder if I blew my own horn considerably. They'll think we're holy horrors. We're safe enough now, for they never show up, nearer than this to Brace Box, and you have a clear road or I'm very much mistaken."

May hit the truth exactly, since there were no more interruptions. The stage rolled into Brace Box at about the usual time, and drew up in front of the hotel where Neville had been stopping.

Jimmy Bower was out with his customary promptness, and held out his hand to assist Miss Viola to alight.

"Bin lookin' fur ye, miss. Hev yer room all slick ter rights, an' you'll find Jim Bower don't keep no slouch ov a place. Yer gripsack? Ov course. Hyar it be! Any other baggage? No. Wal, jest feller me right in. Ther queen ov Sheba never seed a bed like it."

He caught up the traveling-bag and turned away. Before Viola had a chance to get in a word edgewise she had passed through the portal, and was following the landlord along the narrow hallway. She had several times tried to question him, but was always choked off about the second word. Perhaps it would have been so to the end of the chapter if she had not planted herself firmly, at the door of her room.

"Before I go a step further I wish to know, if my cousin, Captain North, is stopping with you? It seems very strange that he is not here to meet me."

"Strange! Why, strange are no name fur it. Thar's his room; thar's his plunder; thar's everything but him, hisself. He went out one night fur a stroll; an' sure ez preachin', he's furgot ter come back yit. But, he'll be 'long. He's bound ter come; Solid Sam's on ther war-path, ter fetch him; an' what Sam says goes—ef it's in three halves an' a dozen quarters."

Viola had felt a premonition of evil, so that the not very clear statement of Mr. Bower was not as great a shock as might have been expected. She questioned him with a coolness

that he had not thought she would possess; and so attained the history of what had happened at the Bower, the previous evening, with far greater minuteness than Jimmy had yet given it.

"And this man, Oregon: what was he doing while all this happened? What has he been doing since?"

"He got thar jest after ther lights went out. Him an' Sam hez bin lookin' 'round fur a trail ever sence; but I can't hear ez they've found one. They do say ez they jest turned ther Bower upside down, an' them a-kerryin' a shooter in each hand. They didn't find notbin' ez I've heard ov. Ef you'll take it kinder easy till yer gits through with supper mebhe I kin find 'em an' bring 'em in. They kin tell yer a heap better what's bin goin' on. Beggin' yer pardon, miss, I jest run this hyar hotel, and don't take much 'count ov what's ter pay at them rum-mills."

"Very well. Try and find Oregon. I need supper soon, as you suggest. If I tried to do anything without it I fear I would break down. This has been a trying day. That will do."

She allowed Bower to escape—which he seemed very glad to do—and entered her room, closing the door behind her.

If Jimmy had been listening a moment later, he might have been concerned for the health or safety of his guest. Fortunately, he had moved fairly out of hearing of the low cry that Viola uttered when she saw, limply lying in the one chair in the apartment, the figure of a man.

The cry was given in spite of herself, and it was not repeated. Already there seemed to be something familiar about the figure. She boldly advanced toward it, though it would have been no great wonder if she had been more alarmed than ever at finding in her room Neville North, haggard, weak, and his clothes decidedly the worse for wear.

The entrance of Viola had not startled him, and when he recognized her he did not seem surprised.

"You are here, are you? See that the door is shut. I didn't think I would be able to meet you; but, I'm here, on time, after all, and not much harm done. When I get rested a bit, and surround a square meal, I think I shall be able to leave Brace Box, in the first boat. I've had enough of this camp, and no mistake."

In the outset the voice was low and uncertain, but it gathered strength as he went along. The last sentence came out so round and full that there certainly could be no discount on his earnestness.

Viola was sympathetic; and yet there was a, by her, unsuspected tinge of scorn in her voice as she spoke:

"So soon? I warned you that it was no child's play, but you thought you could succeed where men who were bred to the most desperate work had failed. It is early in the game for you to quit, but it is little more than I expected. At least, you will tell me what has happened before you go?"

"You are right. They have broken my nerve between them at the very outset, but—perhaps I can mend it, so that it will be stronger than ever. I am not myself. Twenty-four hours without food or drink—water never tasted so sweet as that I gulped a few moments ago—shakes a man's conceit out of him. When I have filled the aching void, perhaps I will be more like myself."

"Twenty-four hours! Wait a moment. I can help you; and it will be just as well that you keep out of sight until some of that patching is done. Do not move. I will be ready in a moment."

She opened her gripsack hastily. In one of the compartments there was a lunch that had been a little too solid for her delicate tastes; but was just about the thing for a superlatively hungry man.

The cold meat and biscuit that she set before the young man disappeared in a twinkling, while half a dozen generous mouthfuls from her traveling flask helped wonderfully to steady his nerves.

"There, no more!" he said, at length. "I have had all that it is safe to wish for. I am afraid I made an idiot of myself, a bit ago; but, the fact was, I was all broke up. I can assure you that while the danger lasted I kept as stiff an upper lip as could be desired."

"But what was the danger?"

"I heard that idiot who runs this concern mooning to you about my mysterious disappearance. As far as he went the facts were not so far wrong. You ought to be able to suspect. Some one is interested in preventing the success of our mission, and made a very healthy effort to put a stop to it in the very send-off."

"A very well-posted set of rascals they are; and the wonder to me is that, knowing so much of the inside facts in the case, they should not have begun with you! When I found what a mess I was in, I vow I never thought that you would get into Brace Box alive. I doubt if you would have done so had they known of your coming."

"You are mistaken, there, Neville," retorted Viola, quietly.

The young man was speaking as though it was

a special grievance that she had been permitted to travel through unmolested.

"I had an adventure that might have proved as unpleasant as your own had it not been for an unexpected piece of good fortune. I had expected to be the sole passenger, but it turned out that I had a companion who was equally ready with tongue and revolver. When the stage was attacked the ruffians were beaten off, and I am here in safety. Now, tell me briefly what has happened; and, especially, what was said. There ought to be a valuable hint or two to be gathered out of it."

"Ah! You had some one to fight your battle! I did not even have the chance to make a fight. The lights went out a second or two before some one got a grip of steel on my throat. It seemed to me that I was tossed up through the ceiling; but, I was so dazed I couldn't tell exactly how the thing was done. I fancy they thought I was altogether insensible. Then I was hastily dragged along."

He ceased speaking and turned his head sideways, in an attitude of listening.

There was a light footstep along the uncarpeted floor of the hallway; and just as North threw up his hands, a derringer in each, the door flew open before a pair of Herculean shoulders hurled against it.

Quick as thought the young man fired.

There was a half-choking cry; and the man who came lurching over the threshold tossed up his hands wildly and went down with a crash, just as North, without even a word of leave-taking, sprung through the window and disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

CHESTNUT BRINGS A LETTER.

THE man who stumbled headlong into Viola's room could thank the unnecessary impetus he had given his shoulders, for saving his life. The man who went out of the window would have fared worse had not Oregon thrown up his hands as he fell.

The action was an instinctive blind when he found the drop was on him and the bullet coming. As he touched the floor his right hand was at his waist.

Then his revolver came up cocked, and he pulled trigger as he lay.

"Picked sticks at a shader, by ther rollin' wheels!"

Up he started, and rushed to the window. He knew he had missed his mark by half a dozen inches; but was in hopes he could catch a glimpse of the game within pistol-shot.

The disappearance was complete.

Behind him there was something like a comedy going on.

Viola, without a cry, had sprung to the wall. There she stood, as much out of harm's way as possible, watching the unexpected fray.

The action of Neville North was, to say the least, very remarkable, for she had recognized the Sport with a Scar the moment the door flew open.

What had come between these two, that they should seek each others' lives? And, who was this at Oregon's heels?

As the latter rose to his feet, and cleared the doorway, this other man stepped in.

He looked pretty much like the ghost of hard times. An old slouch hat, that might have been dug from the bottom of an abandoned sluice, was pulled well down over his eyes. A pair of muddled jeans pantaloons, fairly well reduced to streamers, festooned his heels and was gathered in, almost at his arm-pits. A scant jacket, that might have been the remnant of Joseph's coat of many colors, was drawn tightly over his shoulders.

"Viola!" this object exclaimed, giving the overshadowing slouch a toss, and facing the young lady, who stood staring at the apparition.

This young man turned out to be Neville North also.

It was no wonder that Viola held up both hands to wave him off, while she eagerly scanned his face. There seemed to be no mistake about the tones of that voice; yet, if this was Neville, who was the other?

"Oh! yer needn't be afeard ov him!" said Oregon, as he turned away from the window, satisfied that there was nothing to be seen of the fugitive, and that pursuit was useless.

"This hyar are ther pure, white quill, an' ef you'll listen to him warble his leetle yarn, you'll be apt ter learn what a thunderin' fraud that other gerloot war."

"What is the meaning of this? If you are Neville North, who was it that I found here?"

"That I cannot tell with certainty, since I did not see him; but I believe it could have been none other than Cyril."

"That's 'bout ther lay ov ther land, ez I figger it out, marm!" interposed Oregon.

"You must reely excuse us fur comin' in, so ter speak, head-first; but we heard him a-chinin', an' kinder feared he'd git more p'int than war good fur yer health ef we let ther interview go on. That war his leetle game. An' I guess Mr. North, hyar, wouldn't Lev objected ter git-in' a leetle even, sence they give him a purty tough shake-up."

"If that was Cyril North—and I can well be-

lieve that it was—then he knows too much already, without any telling of mine. But, how is it that he has not only learned of our coming, but even of the little minutiae that have only been spoken of between ourselves—our plans for going and coming? If he knows this much, he must know all."

"No; or he would not run the risks he has done to obtain an interview with you when you were totally off your guard. But he suspects, and is on his defense. More than that. He must believe in his own strength, or he would strike where he dallies."

"I should say he had struck. Perhaps I can safely lay to him the attack on me along the road; and certainly you yourself have felt the weight of his hand since you have been in Brace Box."

"He dared to attack you?"

"Some one did; and, as they seemed unwilling to proceed to extremities, I begin to think this same Cyril North had something to do with the affair."

"How was it?"

Again Viola rehearsed her adventure with Gadley's Gang. This time she felt more certain of her audience. When she had finished, she added:

"I have heard one account of the affair at the Bower and what followed immediately afterward. Perhaps it was reasonably correct, but I did not learn how you made your escape, and how you happen to be here so opportunely."

"The whole story is short enough, and needs little explanation. Some one turned the lights out, and in the darkness I was choked into insensibility."

"The proprietor of the house, or some of his employees must have been a party to the outrage. I may have been dropped through a trap, but it is just as likely that I was carried out bodily. The next thing I knew I was dressed in these rags—all but the hat, which I picked up afterward—tied up neck and heels, and lying in the darkness of a small cellar. If Oregon's eyes had not been better than yours, I would have been there yet, and Cyril would have been deep in your confidence. He saw me, as he thought, creep out of a shanty, and steal away toward the hotel."

"Provisionally, he was in no great haste to claim acquaintance. He thought he detected something suspicious in my movements, and decided that, anyhow, I could get away without assistance. Meantime, it would be just as well to take a look at the place I came from."

"He found me there, and ravenously hungry. Excitement has been holding in check the gnawings that I felt, but they are coming on again. I propose that there should be a short recess while I get into decent clothes. Then we can adjourn to the supper-table, and continue the consultation afterward. If I am not mistaken, you have not tried the cuisine of the house, and I assure you it is not bad for a frontier camp."

As Neville told his story his spirits revived. By the time he had finished it he was very much himself again.

In proportion as he grew gay, Viola grew grave.

"Your prototype has just cleaned out my sachel, so that I suppose if you have fasted as he said he had, it will be best to follow your suggestion. But I confess the boldness of these plotters and planners is greater than I could have believed. And what sort of a place is it where such things can go on without causing even passing comment among the citizens? Two revolver-shots in this room, and not a soul cared to inquire whether there was anything wrong."

"Bless yer soul, miss, this are Brace Box," explained Oregon. "Ther popyerlation are too busy, each man a-lookin' after his own deviltry, ter keer what happens ter outsiders, onless thar's a chance fur coin in findin' out. You kin bet it's all a skin game hyar from ther word go."

"Talk a little slow, Oregon," remonstrated Neville.

"Tommy was giving me a square deal, and that's a fact."

"A winnin' on ther trap what he lost on ther table," responded Oregon, with some scorn.

"A chief hyar kin shoot, gouge, stab an' tramp all over a tenderhuff an' nobody won't take notice ez long ez they don't see a safe chance ter deal a game ov ther own. Yer hev ter take keer ov yerself ef ye'r a stranger in Brace Box; an' be mighty keerful who yer gits ther drop on when yer doin' it. This camp would rise right at a man that minded his own business an' wouldn't be either a lion er a lamb."

"That is Brace Box to a dot; now we will look into the larder," laughed Neville.

"If he gets to descanting on the merits of the only honest man he has met here I will die of starvation."

"Hyar goes fur grub, then, ef we kin find it. Reckon it will take a little scouting 'round, but it's good when we get it; now, that's a fact."

The result justified Oregon's belief. The supper had been in course of preparation, and Neville found Bower on the eve of starting to call his lady guests, and apologize for the long delay.

The reappearance of Neville North was cer-

tainly a surprise; but his questions, a whole volley of which he let drive, were promptly met with a reply that it was perfectly impossible to talk while so terribly hungry.

"All right, then. Just step 'round to ther hash rooms; an' I'll come at yer when other things is slack. Thar's a young lady hyar now axin' fur you. Guess I'd better tell her you've come in."

"I have seen her and she says she is nearly starved. Keep her waiting so long again and you'll know the reason why."

Bower looked curiously at the speaker, and then led the way, being joined outside of the "office" by Miss Viola and Oregon.

The corridors were not very extensive. A few steps through a narrow hall brought them to the "hash room," and as they entered a bright-looking young lady glanced up and nodded at Miss North.

"Thought you'd find your way here, and was too hungry to spend time looking you up. Not much danger of getting lost wandering about through the vastness of this establishment. I see you have found your friends?"

Viola had allowed her acquaintances of the stage to drop out of sight without much ceremony; but it had not been intentional. Her interest in other things had simply caused her to forget.

She answered with a cordiality that she really felt.

"Yes. This is the relative I spoke of, Mr. North, Miss May. Consider yourselves acquainted."

"Thanks, very much, for the honor," said Neville, bowing low.

"I have heard of the adventure with Gadley's gang, and when I get to it you'll hear my praise, astonishment and admiration. I have had an adventure myself, however, and am hungry enough to eat for three. Positively, I can do nothing else."

"No one wants you to. Here is the lay-out. Consider what is your especial vanity and regulate yourself accordingly. I am mum as an oyster until I have seen you go clean through the bill of fare."

Merry May laughed, and set the example by devoting her time strictly to enjoying the pleasures of the table. Of course, now and then, a few words were said but there was no regular conversation.

They were getting near the home stretch, and all pretty much together, when the door opened, and instead of the landlord the young man known as Chestnut Chink came shambling in.

He stopped just after he had crossed the threshold and stared at the party.

Something was evidently not exactly in the shape he had expected to see it, for he scratched his head and even made a motion as though he thought of beating a retreat.

"What is it?"

Neville North looked up sharply, and spoke sternly. The interruption was not at all to his taste.

"Why, boss, it's sutbin' like a mis-deal, an' I reckon I'd better go back an' git a fresh shuffle. It's 'mazin' how keerless some folks is 'bout bizzness."

"What do you want? What did you come in here for? Talk quick! There's a tingling about my fingers that seems to tell me I am destined to drop somebody through the window soon; and I wouldn't wonder if that somebody was you."

"Door's good ernuf fur me, he, he! Jest take it easy an' I'll open ther box. Gospil truth an' no lyin'! Ther feller w'ot's ter go outen ther winder ain't hyer. But he give me a letter."

Chestnut, as he spoke, held up the missive.

"Well, who is it for? Can't you read? Your tongue seems to be able to do its full duty, and a little more."

"I kin read; but in this hyer lay-out readin' don't count. Ther outside's all white paper. Ther d'rection's in thar."

He struck his forehead with his smudgy paw, and continued:

"I war ter d'liver it ter ther young lady at Jimmy Bower's w'ot 'rived on ther hearse. Mebbe you'll answer ter that same?"

He addressed his question to Merry May, who happened to be seated nearest to him, and was watching him with good-natured interest.

"I certainly came this evening, and by the stage, but I don't know that any one here would be apt to send me a letter."

"No. I sh'd jedge yer warn't s'pectin' this. Yer see, when a pair of queens come out ter-gether I war afeard I'd lost my ante. Ef I ain't right I ort ter be, an' that's all I'm keerin' about."

"Thar's one thing more."

"I war ter slip it inter yer hand when nobody warn't a-lookin'. Ef ther balance ov ther party'd jest close thar opticks, er turn 'em towards that winder thar gentleman 'pears ter hev a mortgage on, I kin close out ther deal an' go on rejoicin'."

"But before I take a letter that comes in such a questionable way, I must have a better idea of who it is from. Come, sir! I am not used to being trifled with. You don't look like the man to originate an insult. I warn you, though, that you may find yourself in hot water."

"Sorry, mum, that you look at it in those lamps. I'm ez innercent ez a defunct babe. A man—a big man, purty much all whiskers an' coat—axed me ef I'd like a clubbin' er would I rather earn a dollar?"

"You kin guess w'ot I sed."

"Then he told me ther balance, an' give me ther letter an' ther cart-wheel. You kin hev it—ef yer take it 'cordin' ter contract—er you kin let it erlone. Thar may be millions in it, an' thar may be not."

"With the 'not' most likely. Still, I imagine the best way to get at the mystery is to take the letter. Will everybody please look the other way? This fellow intends to follow orders if it breaks owners."

Merry May was just in time, for Chestnut had made a movement as though to withdraw. He looked around and saw that the eyes of the other occupants of the room were bent in the direction he had indicated.

He dropped the note into the outstretched hand of Merry May, and went hastily out of the room.

CHAPTER VII.

MERRY MAY STARTS OUT CALLING.

OREGON had kept discreetly silent during the presence of Chestnut Chink. When the young man went out, he drew a sigh of relief.

"That's a young man ter tie to; jest please don't disremember."

The announcement was made in a whisper that could not have been heard two yards, but he looked around to be certain that no one else was present.

"Why, what is there specially praiseworthy about him?"

Merry May glanced up from the perusal of the note, and threw in the question in a meditative way.

"He ain't sech a blame big fool ez he looks; an' that's more nor yer kin say fur one man outen a thousand. I kinder thought he war on our side, an' now I know it. He was knowin' ez well ez us whar that belonged, but he placed it whar he thort it would do ther most good. Ef he can't beat ther old boy round ther stump, I want ter know!"

"But perhaps it was intended for me, after all. It meutions no names, and the parties may want to meet me just as badly as as you imagine they wish to see Miss North."

That young lady looked up on hearing her name mentioned.

"If it is not strictly private and confidential, perhaps you would inform us as to its contents."

"As I told you, the writer wishes to see me—or some other feminine—and appoints a rendezvous at ten o'clock precisely, in front of the Hole in the Ground. Ah, won't there be a scatterment when I get there, and they find they've wakened up the wrong passenger?"

"But you are not going all by yourself? It is the light of folly to think of it."

"Perhaps—and perhaps not. If I can't take care of myself, it's time that I knew it, closed out business, and went home. If I don't come out level you will have a chance to guess where you would have been."

And Miss May laughed softly as she rose from the table and consulted her watch by the not very certain light.

"Of course I'll post you all upon the result of the racket," she continued.

"There is plenty of time, I see, to look around the camp a little. Perhaps, for to-night, at least, it would be just as well that we are not seen in company. I think that no one will suspect me of being a kind of side-pard, as it were; and I can see an advantage in that if your unknown friends should turn out to be very desperate individuals. Good-night all. There may be something worth telling in the morning!"

She waited for no answer, and did not seem to hear the good-nights that followed her. Neville North, who was a little puzzled, half rose; but she was gone before he could speak.

"Who, under the sun, is she?" he asked, as the door closed.

"A good little woman from 'Wayback,'" smiled Oregon.

"If yer hed bin 'round among the sports ov this section yer wouldn't hev hed ter ax that, after yer on't heered her name. Onless Miss Viola wants ter go it blind—which I wouldn't advise—jest let her alone. She might git mad an' go ter work on ther other side. She's smart ez they make 'em, quick ez a cat, an' full ov luck up to ther chin. Thar's nothin' that she could give away; an' ef thar's anythin' thet kin be learned I reckon she's ther party ter git thar when she strikes fur ther bottom. I'd like mighty well ter see ther cirkiss, but I ain't yearnin' ter hev her pick trigger my way. Ef you two hev anythin' to talk over now's yer time. I'll go hunt fur Sam, and ease his mind. He's been awfully worked up, an' wants ter see ther captain bad. Ef it's too late ter-night, when I find him, he'll be on the sod early in ther mornin'."

"If I thought we could find him at the Bower I would go along," responded Neville.

"I want to show up at that lively little section of pandemonium, and let them know they can't bluff over me, or scare me. Perhaps I had better wait awhile, though. If convenient, drop in about nine o'clock and see if I'm there, and how the game is running. I confess that I do not like to see Viola mixed up with our young friend who just went out, but in war you can't always stop to consider your allies, and as long as she is on our side it won't do to neglect her, or be too particular. Keep an eye out about the Hole in the Ground. There may be a chance to help that fresh young maiden."

"All right! In Brace Box it's eyes open an' fingers ready. So-long, pard; I may see yer later."

It was handy to take in the Bower, and Oregon took a glance through the rooms.

None of his particular acquaintances were there, so he did not make a very long stop, intending to return soon.

Had he waited a few moments he would have been able to mark the entrance of Merry May, who had gone back to the costume-room in the stage.

She did not don the masculine habiliments for the sake of disguise, but the result was all the same. It took an extra keen pair of eyes to note that the youngster, who ruffled up to the bar with his hands on his hips and his nose in the air, was not a handsome, beardless, stylishly-dressed young man.

"Johnny, good-evening. What's the very lightest drink you can find for a young lady? When I strike a bitters fountain I always feel it my duty to help keep the stream going; but I can't join in on the average bug-juice. I want something a leetle softer."

The bartender looked up. May was speaking in her most feminine tones. Knowing pretty well how she looked she wanted to convince the man on the other side of the plank.

With her words and tones as pointers it was not so hard to believe the truth in the case, and the bartender was ready to do business.

"Good-evening, miss. Don't know that I ever saw you before, but I wouldn't wonder if I could call the first letters of your names—and they sound like Merry May. We're not very partial to sports of the other sex, at the Bower; but you're welcome. If you need backing—and the best of men do that sometimes when they try to play a lone hand here—just call on me. And there's a demijohn of sherry here that is rather better than fair if you leave sugar out of it."

"So you don't admire the sex on the average? Well, I don't blame you. They are apt to make more noise than profit in a well regulated house like this. Maybe I'd be as bad as any of them if I drank the whole of that demijohn, I sometimes have to drink for form's sake, and I like to know, beforehand, what sort of an infliction I am going to endure. Who's your best man here?"

"What way? Brace Box has several chiefs, and we haven't made up our minds which is the best, all around."

"For a slugger, Solid Sam is generally supposed to take the cake. When it comes to shooting, Colonel Killer is an unhandy man to have against you; while Charley Coldcard is generally supposed to be able to call the deck by name. They can each hold an end up at the other's line about as well as the average. If you are going to open for business I wouldn't try very hard to rope either of them into a game."

"Thanks! You're awfully kind. Those are the three best, are they?"

"Nothing else near them."

"Don't forgit leetle, teetle, Paul Morrison, w'ot lives up ther gulch. He's a cripple, but he's a cuss."

Chestnut Chink was convenient to the spot, and slipped in his say-so, just as he had done when Oregon was taking the census.

"What have you got against Paul Morrison?" said May, regarding the young man with a cold stare.

"Nothin'. I'd ez soon lean on ther hind legs of a mule. I war only jest a-sayin'. Thar ain't no one gives him credit, only me. I hev ter tell ther truth er bu'st."

"Don't mind him, miss. He's a little wrong in his upper story. This Morrison he speaks of is a no-account cripple that the boys kind of lend a helping hand."

"He's ther only man in Brace Box thet no one bez tried ter plug. Ef that don't read his pedigree, Chestnut Chink can't, an' won't try to."

"Thanks for the information, and I'll jot it down," replied the young lady. "It may come handier than you think. If it does, I won't forget to give you credit in a solid way that I am sure you will admire."

Then, to the bartender:

"And Charley Coldcard—where will I be apt to find him?"

"Right in there. You can't miss the way; but if you will wait a minute I'll be able to show you the route and point out your man. Of course this is confidential, as I understand it. Chestnut, if you breathe a word of this I'll kill you on the spot."

He looked threateningly at Chink, who grinned and giggled.

"I could keep a hotel meself, ef I hed ther chance, an' you bet I ain't talkin' 'bout what I hear ef I kin only git ter see ther fun. Ef she can't wait ter git eyes on Charley, I could pint him out meself; an' you could come 'long bimeby when ther racket begun."

"All right, but if they catch you raising a row in there you'll come out minus a scalp. Don't you forget it. Take Chestnut in tow, miss. He can point out—as he says—the man that you're after."

Together the two passed on to the next room.

"That's ther daisy," whispered Chestnut, cautiously, indicating a man who sat by himself at one of the little tables.

"He looks ez though he war in a prime bad humor, so I'll draw out. You kin size him up from here, an' then go over an' do yer talkin'."

Charley Coldcard was certainly thinking about something more than usually disagreeable, for the ordinarily impressive features had taken an unpleasant look. A young man would be very tender in the feet, and something of a fool to boot, who could not just then recognize him as a dangerous man.

Merry May was neither a tenderfoot nor a fool; but she came up smiling.

"Charley Coldcard, I believe?"

"Correct you are. What can I do for you?"

"Pass the time away—or help to do it—for an hour or so. I'm a stranger in the camp, and have an appointment for ten o'clock. How to put in the intervening time I can't so clearly see, so I come to you as the likeliest man I can pick out to play the good Samaritan. In that time I can find out whether you know anything about the pasteboards. If it should turn out that you do, I could see you later, and have an interesting time. I play cards myself."

She put a good deal of laugh and banter in her voice, and if Coldcard had not been the professional gambler that he was, it is more than likely that she would have bewitched him into a game anyhow. He recognized the sex if not the woman, and was as polite as could be.

"That is the style of invitation I am more inclined to give than to refuse, and I'm not in the habit of giving a warning along with it. I should be only too happy to accommodate you, but I play a strong game—so strong that even in Brace Box they talk about barring me out when some one proposes to look around for enough material to get up a little game. I had to give up short cards a year ago, though I am not entirely out of practice. Faro is my mainstay and dependence now, though they are beginning to say I am too lucky at that."

"Then you are the man I have been yearning to meet. As I play solely for amusement there's not much fun playing with a chump that don't know the value of an ace full. Time is flying. Let's get to work."

"All right. I suppose this will suit you as well as any place, and time is too precious to waste. If we want to get in any real work in this trial canter, as you say, we had better get up to the starting-post."

Coldcard was not idle during the conversation.

He was watching covertly but keenly the fair face before him, and smoothing the wrinkles out of his own.

He had hardly made up his mind when they sat down to play.

"Poker, of course," he suggested; and Merry May nodded.

CHAPTER VIII.

PAUL MORRISON'S WIFE.

"ARE you Charley Coldcard?"

The gambler was just weaving the cards together preparatory to a cut for deal, when a man laid a hand on his shoulder, and eagerly asked the question.

"Most any one could tell you that was my name; what's the matter with you?"

"Read that! A fellow that called himself Boston Joe got as far as Bed Rock with it, and paid me big to bring it the rest of the way. Said he'd traveled forty miles in three hours, and I've beat his record."

"And where's Boston Joe? He's not a man to let forty miles break him up."

Coldcard looked at the man searchingly, still holding unopened the letter that had been thrust into his hand.

"His cayouse stumbled just above Bed Rock, and he went over. An awful bad fall it was, and he broke a leg if nothing worse. They kerried him into camp, but he wouldn't have a thing done till he'd started that letter on. You'd better read it, and don't forget the time you got it. Joe said there was twenty-five extra depending on that."

Coldcard opened the letter, and glanced at its brief contents, then he nodded gravely to the man.

"All right, my friend. I've got time and all down. There's a ten for yourself, and I've no doubt Joe will divide fair. Go around to Bower, and tell him to treat you well on my account. You'll want to rest over night, but I'll

get my horse and go on at once. Be good to yourself."

Then he turned to Merry May.

"Sorry for the disappointment, but I'll have to excuse myself. Brother Jim has got himself shot, and I'll have to go over to Left Bower and nurse him. It's an eighty-mile road over the mountains, and I want to get there before morning."

"Sorry you have to go, but of course I won't detain you. Perhaps we'll meet when you get back."

The messenger had disappeared, Coldcard went also and Merry May was cast on her own resources.

"No use," she muttered to herself. "The fates are not with me to-night. If I was wise I'd go back, touch the top stone in the southwest corner of the foundation of Jimmy's hotel, and then go to bed; let the Norths run their own market wagon; and see what fish fate brings to the net to-morrow. Only—that's not my style. I'll see it out, or break a wheel. The time's almost up, anyhow."

It was not hard for her to while away the half-hour she had to spare; and promptly on time she was gliding almost within reaching distance of the post that supported the huge red lantern suspended over the entrance to Hank's underground saloon.

There she halted, and, first consulting her watch to mark the exact hour, raised her right arm thrice, extended to its full length above her head.

No one was in sight, but a score of men might be lurking unobserved among the shadows.

It did not take long to know that her signal had been observed. A shuffling footstep close behind caused her to look around hastily.

A bent little man stood almost at her elbow.

"Well, my dear, you got the note of the little old man, and were not afraid to trust him. That is right. He can do you no harm, and will do you good. But come away from here. It is not a good place to talk; and if we stay too long we may have some friends around at the interview that you do not care to meet. You ought to know that you are in danger in Brace Box."

"Or out of it, too, for that matter, old gentleman. When a young lady has the handling of a cool half-million she is considered fair game for every hawk and vulture to fly at. You can put it down at the top of the page in your diary, for the day, that I'm not trusting you a bit further than the rest; and that if I catch you trying to stack the cards or set them up for a bottom deal, in the language of the camp, there will be cold meat for breakfast. With that warning, given in sober earnest and for the good of your soul, you can lead the way."

She spoke with a coolness that the little old man evidently had not expected. If the shadow of a suspicion of her identity had once entered his mind he might have at least asked some questions. Her tones were certainly not those he would have expected to hear from Viola North.

But he took it so thoroughly for granted everything was all right that he only shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Merry May followed him without hesitation. When they had gone perhaps twenty or thirty rods the man turned toward her again.

"I am not going to try to mystify or deceive you. I am Paul Morrison. I live up the gulch, and am taking you to my house. You will find there the individual who wishes to see you, and give you important information."

"This person—is he Cyril North?"

"Bless your soul, no!"

"Or his representative?"

"Scarcely; but let time show that. I promised you important information regarding North, and will keep my word. It may prevent some uneasiness, so I will tell you that it is my wife you are going to see."

"For a square deal I would rather meet a wife than a widow; but I don't think I would feel particularly uneasy if I knew I was to meet the old gentleman from below. It required a young lady with nerve to undertake the peculiar quest I have on hand, and, thank the good master, I have it. Don't trouble yourself about me and my revolver. We can take care of ourselves."

"I see you do not need encouragement now—after the interview perhaps my effort, if I make any, will be better appreciated. For the present I will keep silent."

After this somewhat significant speech, Paul Morrison hurried on in silence, and Merry May followed close at his heels. In spite of his assurances she was not altogether certain what kind of a reception she was to meet at his lonely little cabin, up the gulch.

When he halted, at last, it was to signify that they had reached their destination.

"Go in, my dear. She is waiting for you, and as what she has to say may not be for my ears I will take a stroll back to the city. I don't think you will want old Paul about while you do your gushing, but I will be back before it is over."

A queer sort of a man he was. She had not

seen his face, which he kept sedulously in the shadow, but his voice hardly agreed with his slouchy, hang-dog appearance, and for an old man it was certainly clear and firm. What would his wife be like?

The way was open, and without further hesitation Merry May went forward to see.

The building in which Morrison was domiciled looked but little better than a shanty from without; once within, the cabin became almost palatial.

The room was lit by a shaded lamp that shed a mild radiance over it, its softened light penetrating to every corner. The table on which it stood was elegantly covered, and on it lay a dozen richly bound volumes. On the walls were hung framed pictures, while under Merry May's feet, heavy carpet deadened the sound of her steps, and made her almost think she was walking in fairy land. On the opposite side of the table sat a beautiful woman, who looked up with a languid stare, and then raised her eyebrows in a way that indicated mild astonishment.

"For a shrinking maiden, accustomed only to the mild way of the effete East, you come in rather a questionable shape. Nevertheless you are just as welcome as though you were in silks and diamonds. Be seated."

Merry May threw herself leisurely in an easy-chair. Her elbow rested on an arm of the chair, and her hand supported her chin. The action brought to view an eye of fire, that gleamed over at Mrs. Morrison. She could not miss seeing the great solitaire that glowed on the finger of her visitor.

"Neither diamonds nor silks are exactly the apparel to be used after nightfall; but if a diamond can be of any use in this matter I can show my credentials. Ah! I see you observe. Pretty, ain't it? You want to look at it?"

The diamond did seem to have produced a peculiar effect. If Mrs. Morrison was not cowering back in her chair she looked very much like it.

"No, no," she said hastily, waving Merry May back.

"That ring! Surely there is not another like it. I would only like to ask how and where you got it?"

Merry May gave one of her peculiar laughs.

"Don't imagine I stole it, or even bought it with a price. It came to me as it came to others, and I know just what it is worth. I will believe what you may now choose to tell me a good deal more than if you had never seen it. Never mind the silks. I can show them the next time I come. Just proceed with your information."

Mrs. Morrison had recovered her nerves before Merry May ceased speaking.

"Pardon me for an agitation that I do not often show. A friend of mine once had such a ring—its very image. The friend died years ago. When you grow a little older you will understand better how I have felt at sight of it. And now, to what I may call business. I understand, no matter in what way, that you are seeking information of one Cyril North. Is it so?"

"Not information so much as the man himself. Yet, if you have anything to say in regard to him, you will find me an attentive listener."

"I might tell you a great deal, but since I have seen you I am not so sure it would be to your profit. I doubt if you need the warning that I sent for you to give."

"If you think I am not willing to listen to words of wisdom from one who knows how to speak them you are very much mistaken."

"When you deal with Cyril North, young lady, you are dealing with a dangerous man, a fox, a wolf, a tiger that would devour. If you are wise you will depart from Brace Box at the earliest possible moment, and leave him to work out his own destiny."

"I have no love for Cyril North, madame; but I have for justice. He may have graduated into the veriest ruffian that ever walked the earth, but I do not forget who and what started him on the downward course. I do not say that I would not give thousands to keep quiet the history of all the sin and shame and crime of the days and nights that are past; but if their record must be known, it must. He shall have justice—if he wants it."

"A fig for justice; what he wants is hard coin. He may demand the first, but rest assured he will take the second, if you allow him the chance."

"Then, all you sent for me for was to give me a warning," said Merry May, a dash of scorn in her voice.

"Not all, though I thought if needed I would give you a leaf out of my own bitter, black experience with him, so that you might know the manner of man you are seeking."

"And now?"

"Perhaps it might be as well to omit that, and simply tell you what you have reason to expect."

"But if I come in all friendliness, what can I have reason to expect, save that when he is found—that is, if he is in the land of the living—he will give me a respectful hearing? If nothing more comes of the interview, he can go

his way and I can go mine. Why should harm come out of that?"

"Because, by so doing, you will have proved him to be yet living—something that few now know—and because he will never believe that you come as any other than a foe."

"He is a coward, then, as well as cruel," was Merry May's cutting remark.

"Nevertheless, he may think what he chooses so long as he listens. After that, whatever he may decide, we have done all that conscience requires. It may be the better for us, or it may be the worse. Can you put us face to face with him?"

"I? Scarcely—nor would I if I could. Who can find him if he wishes to stay hidden?"

"Why then did you send for me?"

"To warn you of him and of men I have reason to believe his friends. In Brace Box their name is legion, and chief among them are Colonel Rollins, Captain Coldcard, and a man known as Sam Ryan, or Solid Sam. Either one of them is dangerous in his way, but when guided by a man like Cyril North, they are no less terrible because blind instruments of his wrath."

"One thing you have forgotten—give to me the name by which Cyril is known here. Given that and I do not suppose the difficulty in finding him will be so great."

"I do not know it—no one knows it. It was by a chance that I learned the true name of the man of mystery. If I have revealed anything to you it was because it seemed my duty, and because you could understand my duty, and because you could understand me. There are some men here that you do not talk of, and do not ask questions about, if you wish to die of old age. The less you know of their affairs, the better."

Merry May had been watching through the interview more keenly than she seemed to be, and had long since decided that this woman had changed her tactics, or, at least, was carefully holding back the story that she had intended to tell.

"I fancy she knows when the chances are she will be beaten; but, what is her object now? Is she this Cyril North's friend or foe; or is it all a plan that she is making up as she goes along?"

This was what she was thinking, but aloud she said:

"I have no doubt there are men here as wicked as the worst, but I do not think that even they will interfere with strangers who attend strictly to their own business. If they do we must defend ourselves the best we know how, and trust to luck."

"And what can three do against the whole camp?"

"Three?"

"Yes—unless the man known as Oregon is not of your party; though I was given to understand that he was your guide and mentor. I know next to nothing of him, but, if he is a man equal to his position, after what he has seen of the city, his advice should be the same as mine."

"Perhaps it will raise him in your estimation to tell you that he has been insisting on that very point. He has had his doubts if Cyril North has ever been here, and that whether he has or not, the quest in this direction will be hopeless. Quite disinterested in his advice, since he has been receiving a very fair salary to lead us in whichever direction we may elect to go. But I need not tell you that the hour is late. If you have nothing more important to reveal I think I had better take my departure."

"Have I not told you enough? As one woman to another, I have said what manner of man Cyril North is, and at how much peril you seek him. It is more than one in a thousand, having had my experience, would have dared to do."

"Thanks, thanks! Do not think I am ungrateful. One never gets all they hope for; but I appreciate what you have tried to do for us. Of course, if you should obtain any direct information that will be of use, you will let me know. Good-night."

"Good-night. You will find the doors open, and my husband no doubt in waiting. I shall be glad to see you again, when you have more time and less business."

She bowed her visitor out without ever rising from the chair in which she was seated.

"A good looking mix," thought Merry May, as she passed out into the darkness, "but, upon my soul, I believe she brought me here to pump me about Oregon."

She saw, or thought she saw, Paul Morrison some little distance away, and called to him, at the same time quickening her steps a trifle.

To her surprise he paid no attention to her call, but wheeled about and bent forward in an attitude of listening.

Then a man sprung swiftly up at his back and she saw him go down before what seemed a furious blow, while almost at the same time a handkerchief was pressed over her mouth and a strong arm swept around her waist.

CHAPTER IX.

MERRY MAY USES HER WEAPONS.

WHATEVER Merry May's skill with her weapons, and courage in the face of danger, they

could do her no good just then. The attack was so sudden and well planned that there was no chance for resistance.

For a very brief season there was a confused knowledge of struggling violently but in vain. After that was a blank.

"When her senses came wandering back she might have thought herself still in front of Morrison's cabin had she allowed her eyes to remain closed.

She knew, however, that though the heavy shadows had lurked there, the gulch was no such darksome place as this in which she found herself, and there was hardly such an easy seat as this she rested in to be found just outside of the shanty.

Where was she? The work had been so artistically done that the comical side of the question struck her first.

"Ha, ha! If ever I put on side again, or give myself airs before a tenderfoot, male or female, it will be after I have made a new record from a fresh start. At my time of life this thing is disgraceful and that's the double distilled truth. I suppose they have gone through my pockets, if they haven't I'll take a look at things anyhow. I may be able to catch on to my surroundings."

It was something of a surprise to find the taper matches just where they belonged. Striking a light she looked around.

A groan, more in earnest than the mockery that she tried to put into it, testified that the surroundings were not as cheerful as might be desired. The simple fact was, she was in a very good imitation of a dungeon.

A careful inspection showed no weak spot, or salient point for attack. Though it might be possible to make her escape she rather preferred taking time to lay her plans. Very little could be accomplished for the present, and if she had a visitor soon, that little would most likely be discovered before it could do her a particle of good.

Groaning would hardly improve the condition of affairs, and Merry May seldom did anything in which there was neither profit nor pleasure. She quietly lit a cigarette, and suffered herself to sink back in her easy-chair. The rings of smoke curled lazily up, and in the darkness all that could be seen was a single red spot of fire.

She was soon quite herself again, and did not move or wince when suddenly and unexpectedly, a hand was laid on her shoulder.

"Well, little one, does the prospect grow interesting?"

"Take your hand off me, sir. There, keep your distance or I'll begin to shoot. Your servants, I see, have been so kind as to leave my derringers, and I assure you that I know how to handle them."

"Of course, you do, my daisy; but I know you're not wasting good lead on any one but an enemy; and I'm your solid friend. If you don't believe it look in my eyes. I think you can read enough there to make you believe I'm the express champion of all your sex."

"There, show a glim, somebody, and let the damsel get her bearings!"

She was answered in a careless, laughing voice, but the hand was withdrawn; and at the order to some one in the background the cell became suddenly illuminated.

With his arms folded, and a smile on his handsome face, stood Neville North's very double; if, indeed, it was not that gentleman himself.

"You know me, no doubt?" was his salutation, when he saw that Merry May gave something very like a start of recognition.

"It was somewhat inconvenient for me to grant you this interview; but when a lady, you know—a real dyed in the wool, broadcloth clad lady—comes in such royal state, private matters must go to the wall. I am at her service."

The sneer on his lips, as his eyes ran over the little lady's disguise, might have brought a flush to her cheeks if she had held the man in higher esteem; but she was just as cool as she answered:

"I can't say that I have ever had the pleasure of counting you into the circle of my numerous acquaintances, but it is possible I might give a guess and not come a hundred miles off from hitting who you really are. If you're not Cyril North who are you?"

"I don't know that I am that gentleman, and I don't know but that I am. If I am, what do you want of me?"

"What do I want? Nothing at all. I'm just throwing the cards around for a friend. I've no more idea of how they run, or whether it's a stocked deck or a skin game, than if I was the man in the moon. But if you are the young man named, and want to hear of something to your advantage, I can put you into communication with the individuals that desire to do the talking."

"Glad to see that you speak the truth when it serves you better than something else. I thought there must be a mistake somewhere. Viola North is a very fascinating young lady, but she can't strike your gait to save a distance. So you were only looking for Cyril North's hiding-place. Pity you didn't say so up in that blamed old cripple's shanty. I wouldn't have had to listen longer to hear some miscellaneous blackguarding of yours truly, and this folderol might

have been saved, and you would have kept yourself out of a very bad box. Now, what does that delectable pair want? I'm not talking so much about the cub, for he's bad clean through; but Viola ought to be an honest sort of a girl, and I'd be willing to listen to her if it wasn't for the others in the distance."

"You can't ever prove it by me till I get better points; but it's something about a big fortune—a million more or less—and a streak of justice that she thinks you deserve. They didn't confide very deeply in your humble servant, but Merry May wouldn't be herself if she couldn't get one eye on the hole in the millstone, and tell pretty nearly what was on the other side."

"Hum!" said the young man, reflectively.

"There's various kinds of justice that an individual of my general appearance might receive—some of them might be peaches and cream to take, and some fire and brimstone. You couldn't define the term a little closer, I suppose."

"You are a cool one, anyhow. If you're ever in want of a job I'd advise you to hire out as a boss to Gadley's Gang. I'm sorry I can't be more definite; for suspicions can hardly go."

"Everything goes—shoes, stockings and all. Spit them out."

"Why not see the young lady, herself?"

"Why, confound it! ain't I trying? This is the third or fourth effort for a little private conversation; and they don't pan out worth a cent."

"Well, I can't say for certain; but I think—mind you, I only think—that if I was a young man of eminently respectable birth and fitted to adorn society, but was run out of civilization by a charge of murder, bank-robbery, or some other standard crime, and some one came along to say that there was proof that it was all a mistake, and that there was a snug little fortune waiting for the rightful heir if he would only come home, be a good boy, and do so no more, I wouldn't waste much time getting up a new crop of disabilities. I'd be like Captain Scott's coon, and come down at once. That's the gospel according to Merry May, and if you are wise you will get Viola North to expound it as soon as possible. She may be a fool, or she may not; that's for her to know, and you to find out. As I don't see how I can be of any further use, I think I may as well retire. If you are a good boy, I'll allow you to escort me to Jimmy Bower's hotel, where you might make further inquiries."

"You are getting along finely—in your mind. Unfortunately, I don't see my way clear as yet."

The young man pulled thoughtfully at his mustache, and eyed his *vis-a-vis* in a way that she did not altogether admire, as he finally continued:

"I like your frankness, and there is a certain freshness about you that would be too sweet for anything, if it was played on another victim. Can't you see that if there has been no mistakes made in all this guessing and supposing, that if I am Cyril North, you know entirely too much for my future peace of mind? What can I do with you?"

"I can't see just why you are compelled to do anything—except to turn me loose."

"Excuse me! I suspect that you are a female member of the widely-known circle of *chevaliers d'industrie*. If I was worth a million, you would know how to approach it to do yourself the most good. Give me ten thousand or I'll ventilate your record around Brace Box."

"Bless my soul! I didn't know that you had a record."

"That would not be hard to learn. You know entirely too much, and it will require time to think the matter over. As Mrs. North—you are doubtless eligible for the position—your teeth would be drawn. If you were a corpse, you could tell no tales. I must think it all out, though I assure you that you will only go out of this as one or the other."

"And poor Viola? Do you think she intends to visit this sin-cursed country for nothing? It's not likely that she will make all this journey for the sake of getting me a spouse—even if I was willing to accept the worse alternative of the two. And neither of us are willing to domicile in Utah. Go a little slow, Cyril. Handle me with care if you don't want to stumble across your last sickness."

"You can threaten, can you, little one? I like you better when you are jesting. But don't obtrude Viola too much. It's only cutting away the ground from under your own chances. If I turn to her, of course it makes your disappearance an absolute necessity."

"Now, see here, Cyril, I've a derringer in each hand, and the hammers back. At this distance, before you could move a finger, I could put two chunks of lead through the bigness of a silver dollar. I've practiced shooting from my pockets till I have it down very fine. If you're going in for all this nonsense you are talking about, what's to hinder my laying you carefully away out of the damp, and then take my chances on what comes next? Eh! Talk sense, will you, or come off of the roof."

"Firstly, because you are a child of sense and must suspect, if you don't know, that back of

the door there's a gang that would make mincemeat of you if you performed any such experiments. There's no money for you in my death, and you just have pluck enough to believe that as long as the worst don't strike you, there's something better in the good time coming."

"Secondly, as my boys are not natural born idiots, they extracted your teeth when they removed the cartridges from the aforesaid derringers while you were in the land of dreams."

"Reasoned like a Philadelphia lawyer, except that you're wide off everywhere. I can make more coin in one night, flipping the pasteboards, than musing over you for a month; and as for my derringers—don't you think I had brains enough to load them again when I found them empty? Hands up, Cyril dear, or I'll bore you through!"

There was a vicious snap in her last words, as she tossed them at him, that convinced the man they carried sense as well as sound. If he did not elevate his digits he thrust them out, so that it was plain to be seen they were not trying to work any harm, while he made no other motion.

"There's always a chance that a woman can tell the truth, and I'll give you a minute or two to convince me that is what you are giving me now. If you haven't done it in that time, I'll take my departure, and you can try to invent something fresh against my return. It's not very likely the boys would overlook any stray cartridges you might have in your pocket."

"It's the unlikely that always happens. Here's a sample. You can estimate the size of my pop-guns by the dimensions of the bullet. A nice hole it would make. Catch it!"

Merry May never moved her eyes or her right hand; but she drew her left from the side-pocket, where it had rested and gave a toss.

Under the circumstances it was natural for the movement to be a little awkward, and Cyril North could see that the cartridge would not reach the hand that he threw up, though he was not caring greatly. He thought he saw his chance to place himself at least on an even footing, and the movement to catch was intended only as a blind, while his other hand swung back in search of his own revolver.

His motion seemed quick enough too; but Merry May was in a hurry. She sprung sideways just as the missile struck the floor.

Then there was pretty plain evidence that it was no ordinary cartridge she cast. There was a little crash, followed by a sudden volume of loud smelling smoke. It was a leaf right out of Chinese warfare. More than once before she had successfully played the cuttlefish; and the device did not altogether fail her now. There were double pockets to her coat, and in the hasty search while she was insensible her reserve ammunition had been overlooked.

There was just one shot before the room utterly darkened with smoke; and that shot flew wide of its mark. A deathly sickness overcame the man as Merry May flew at him with clubbed derringers—coming from the side where she was unexpected, and striking with a fierce vigor unlooked for in her seemingly slender frame.

Once, twice she struck, and then dashed at the door.

CHAPTER X.

THE GAME AT THE HOLE IN THE GROUND.

OREGON sauntered leisurely into Kid Glove Hank's Hole in the Ground, just as much at home there as though he was a denizen of the burg, and the room was full of his friends. In reality he had hardly spoken to a soul present, and was aware that the place had an unsavory reputation even in Brace Box.

In a business way Hank himself was bad enough, and if he protected his weaker patrons it was more on account of his love for a row than sympathy for them. The Hole was a bad place for a man to set up a claim to be a chief; and not a very good place to go unless he was one.

The room was tolerably dark with tobacco smoke, and reeking with the scent of nicotine and bad whisky. Hank leaned against the bar with his arms folded, watching his cherubs in a possessory sort of way, while his assistants passed out the liquid lightning as it was called for. There were plenty of men playing poker, eucher, and the like, at the rough little tables around the sides of the room, and a good many more were scattered around the floor, or clustered in little knots all the time circulating toward the bar and then back again.

As it was comparatively early, those present were generally sober, and a man like Oregon could stroll through the room without attracting much attention. He looked as though he might be something of the same sort, and not altogether healthy to meddle with. Neville North would have probably been received with more serious inspection if he had perpetrated the *gaucherie* of drinking by himself.

Perhaps there was another reason why he was left unmolested by word or act. Just at that moment all the unattached began a move in one particular direction, while more than one of the short card-players looked up anxiously, as though willing to join the rush.

There was a long table at the end of the bar,

stretching almost across the nook that would otherwise have been left. The top of the table was covered with green cloth, on which yellow tape marked certain divisions.

The table was standing there empty and unused when Oregon entered, but now, as he looked up over his tumbler he saw that a man had taken a seat behind it.

There was nothing particularly notable about this man save that he was a Mexican. Perhaps his eyes were blacker than usual, and his hair a trifle longer, but his face was no more villainous looking than the average run of the countenances that gathered around.

In his hand he held a pack of cards, and he had already placed on the board several buckskin bags and a small pair of scales.

"The tiger with two tails," soliloquized Oregon, as he saw the preparations.

"I haven't bucked the game since I gave the anamile a tussle at San Agustin, and thought all Mexico was on top of me shortly after I caught the dealer working the brace. How he'll eat up the lambs—if they give him a show! And maybe Oregon will be one of the mangled flock."

He strolled carelessly toward the table, where operations were just beginning. As he took his station where he could watch what was going on without being in the very front rank, the dealer drew off two cards and turned them up to the right and left. Then he turned the pack and quietly waited for the gamblers to make their stakes. He had given them the jack and queen for a lay-out, and the Sport with a Scar smiled as he saw them drop to their places.

"He means ter git ther game started ef it lies in ther wood! Ef ther's ary Mexicans to ther front, they'll drop ther dollars on ther jack; an' Americans ez want ter tackle monte, 'll drop ther dust on ther kervage every time. Ef he can't call ther keyards ez he wants 'em, it's his night on fur luck, an' ther'll be a heap more fun ner glory in tryin' a back fall with ther man behind ther table. I reckon I won't crowd this game till I see what's soda."

Oregon hit it about right.

A dozen men threw their dollars on the queen, while two or three silent bettors, with faces dark enough to make them look as though they might be brothers to the dealer, patronized the high-heeled jack.

The cards talked for themselves, so the Mexican kept quiet. When it seemed as though all the stakes were placed, he began to draw off one card after another from the bottom of the pack—which was now on the top.

The game had some slight resemblance to faro, but outside of a few arbitrary regulations, was simplicity itself.

After a time, the jack came out, when the dealer, and his looker-out, or partner, proceeded to draw in all the coin placed on the queen, and then paid to each of the lucky ones the amount he had bet on the jack. When the operation was complete, the bank was considerably ahead.

"A purty good team," thought Oregon, as he watched the performance closely. "Ef I thort thar war enough coin in ther sack ter pay fur ther resk, I might be persuaded. I'll keep on watchin' fur a leetle, though."

There was plenty of time before him—or, so he thought—and with the odd perversity of an occasional gambler, he felt irresistibly drawn toward this game, though it could bite as deep as the regulation tiger. He would have preferred it played with a double lay-out; but, after a little, he thought it time to tackle the animal as it was, and quietly deposited a five-dollar gold-piece on the deuce that happened to be near him.

"One pays the other; he, he!" giggled a voice at his elbow.

"Ef yer wins, it makes me weep, but ef I can't help it how kin I? I struck a bonanzer ter-day, an' I'm goin' ter double er quit. Ef your luck's run out, then mine 'll be in. You kin lay over me with muskel; but fur luck an' brains, Charley Chink are thar in a heap. Say not, pard?"

Very slowly Chestnut Chink edged up and slipped a handful of silver out of his pocket, from which he counted down five dollars to the left, on the king of spades. All the time he watched Oregon with a shrewd, though timorous look, as though expecting an outburst at this defiance.

"We can't both win, and that's a fact," answered the sport, "but I won't lose a cent the more fur it ef yer bucks ag'in' my judgment till to-morrow mornin', an' wins on every turn. I play my game an' you play yourn; we needn't growl over it. I never squeal when a sport coppers my card at faro; an' I guess you won't hear me howl on a tin-pot lay-out like this. Ef, tho', yer reely hev anything in fur me, 'long on account ov that leetle mistake at ther Bower, ye'r a bigger fool ner yer look, tho' that'd be sayin' a heap more fur Brace Box than fur me."

"Thar war a fox called ther grapes sour, 'cause he couldn't scoop in ther bank at the ther leetle tin-pot game. Mebbe this ain't so small ez it looks. Ef I had Mexican Pedro's pile I'd go East. I'm tryin' fur it now. I got forty dollars. An' I ain't got no ill will fur

you, he, he! All cats be gray in ther dark, an' yer grabbed what yer found. You heard 'em laugh when they seen who yer got? Laugh goes, he, he!"

Somewhat puzzled was Oregon, as he turned toward the table when the dealer began to pull the cards. He had thought Chestnut rather inclined to be his friend.

If he had shared in the general estimate of the town in regard to Chink he might have continued in that belief without even doubting. But as he had a lingering suspicion that the young man was better than he looked, he was almost inclined to understand all this as a declaration of war—unless Chestnut was a capper for the game.

Sense or no sense, no one else would suspect the apparently guileless youth; but without sense he would hardly be of much benefit to the bank.

Anyhow, the deuce lost, and Chestnut Chink's visible capital was doubled.

Oregon's face showed no sign of his feeling at all discouraged. His smile grew a little more pronouncedly pleasant as he dropped a ten on the table, still to the right.

"It will take yer hull fortune, sooner er later, leetle man, ef yer foller my lead," he muttered, casting his eye over to see what the imbecile was going to do about it.

He smiled to see the struggle that Chestnut's face seemed to indicate. In one hand he held his five silver dollars, in the other the gold piece that had lately been Oregon's.

The coin might be a mascot. It was clean and bright. On an itching palm it might seem to weigh a ton. At one time it looked as though Chestnut would thrust it in his pocket and fairly run away from temptation. When he clapped the gold and silver together and dashed them on the table he shut both eyes and uttered an audible groan.

Nevertheless nerve, such as it was, won. In due course of time he was ten dollars richer, and was watching the smiling sport drop twenty dollars on his fancy. The loser was doubling his bet every time, and if Chestnut intended to make good his boast he could not add very rapidly to the reserve fund in his pocket. It took all his winnings to follow the lead of the man with a scar.

So far this rivalry had remained unnoticed save by the lynx-eyed dealer and his assistant. The other bettors talked louder and put themselves more to the front. They were wrapped up in their own games and monopolized the attention of the outsiders.

Oregon doubled again and lost. Then once more he doubled, having watched the dealer as he manipulated the cards.

"It's luck! blame me ef it ain't jest a pure streak of hog luck, sich ez even a fool don't git once in a hundred year! It's a square deal they're givin' us, an' ther longest pole knocks ther persimmons. Fur ther sake ov Chestnut I've half a notion ter draw out. When luck turns—an' turn it's bound ter—it'll break him all up. Ov course I kin stand it fur half a dozen rounds—an' this hyar streak can't last furever."

Another loss caused this soliloquy; and as he once more doubled his bet he saw that he was beginning to attract the attention of outsiders, even more than Chestnut Chink.

There were some half-dozen rough-looking men watching the game, who, so far, had not wagered a cent. They glared at him with sinister eyes, devouring his purse when he took it out to renew his stake.

"This time it's sure to win, and I may as well play accordingly. It will make the boy squirm if this lad gets there about the time the stakes are wuth the playing fur. Yes, I'll do it!"

Hardly necessary to say what it was that he intended to do. If Chestnut only had forty dollars to begin with it would not take a very large outlay of capital to swamp him. So far he had been playing on velvet, and his original five dollars. Oregon meant to lay over the other thirty-five, and see what the result would be.

He did it very quietly; so quietly that Chestnut did not notice at first that there was an extra fifty in the respectable little fortune laid down by the Sport with a Scar. He might have overlooked it altogether had it not been for a low word from the capper, who stood so near that a whisper could reach.

He looked at the table and then at Oregon, his jaw dropping as he stared. It had seemed a hard trial to follow his luck with his winnings, but this was something else.

"Ha, ha, ha! Hyar's richness!" rasped a coarse voice at his elbow.

"Chestnut Chink hes bin jest spreadin' hisself, an's goin' in ter bu'st ther bank. Hit 'em ag'in, ole pard, an' we'll help yer ter scatter ther coin when ther fun's over."

Three or four new-comers had edged in to the table. Rough and tough they were; just the kind to follow the youngster to his lair, strip him of his winnings, and then demand thanks for not cutting his throat.

Chestnut recognized them at a glance, and his fingers tightened over his winnings. If the roughest had been ten seconds later they would

have been on the table, and most likely quite a little sum in addition.

The Mexican muttered a low curse; while the capper put his hand suspiciously to his bosom.

"Caramba! Dost thou jump the game when so much a winner? Down with thy dust! Thy friend backs the tray; join with him if thou wilt, or back the ace if it seems best. No other dealer plays such a game as does Pedro. Thou canst always win with the right card, and he would not rob a babe at his table. But play the game out. He has a long arm for him that acts foul."

"Foul er no foul, it's time fur this rooster ter quit fightin'. Mebbe I kin see yer ag'in when the table ain't quite so crowded. Reely, thar ain't room fur me, 'cordin' ter my size. An' I hev ter see a man jest now—'deed an' double I hev."

"Pull yer keyards," interrupted Oregon, as Chestnut crowded his coin into his pockets with anxious haste.

"Ther leetle cuss hes bin hoodoo'n my game long ernuf, an' it's time yer Uncle Ezra had a chance. You can't win ef we both bet, anyhow."

"But if Pedro loses—thou wilt have played an hour, and the bank never have had a dollar of thy money."

"The whipsaw does seem a little tough; but you oughtn't to deal that sort of a game. Ez long ez we don't kick, you shouldn't howl. You gits ther fun, Chink gits ther profits, an' I foot ther bill? You've hed it that way fur some time, an' I'm jest too ready fur a change. Thar's plenty more uv us a-bettin' on yer leetle brace, so pull yer keyards er I'll lift my coin an' go whar thar's some show."

Oregon talked low and slow. No matter what he said, the tones sounded like good advice. Pedro paid no more attention to the victorious Chink, but returned to his cards, which he slipped off as steadily as ever, if, perhaps, a little slower.

Anyhow, Oregon won.

"Five dollars ahead!" he laughed.

"Chestnut knew when it war time ter retire. Luck's turned, an' I reckon, now, I'll split ther bank wide open."

The boast was spoken good-naturedly, but it was something like a prophecy of future business. Everybody looked his way, and then, just as he gathered in his stake, there was the report of a revolver outside, followed by a yell, unmistakably from Chestnut Chink.

CHAPTER XI.

BULL-DOG BEN STRIKES A SNAG.

THE average man in Brace Box wouldn't have gone ten steps out of his way to save Chestnut's neck, and the men that were after him were pretty well aware of the fact. Oregon was a stranger, besides being in the clutches of Pedro's very interesting little game, so they did not reckon on his taking a hand. They went at their work as coolly as though they belonged to Gadley's Gang, and had found the victim alone in the mountains.

The movement that Chink had made was, perhaps, the worst possible under the circumstances, but he had acted in such haste that no doubt he thought he had eluded the roughest, until they rose right in front of him.

"Hold on, pard," said the leader, who was best known as Bull Dog Ben.

"We was jest a-waitin' fur yer. Thar's some mighty tough boys 'round Brace Box, an' you ain't jest got up fur ter stand 'em off ef they come fur you, an' yer sequins. We thort mebbe we'd better see yer hon e."

"Jest you go 'way, Bully Ben. I'm runnin' my own market wagon. Thar war some pid-jins axed a hawk ter fight fur 'em, once; but I ain't jest that kind. Ef you don't let me erlone I'll yell."

"Ha, ha, ha! Jest hear ther leetle rooster. What good d'yer think yellin' 'll do? Augustus Adolphus, take ther gent's other arm, an' we'll lead him out ov danger."

The rather bold front that Chestnut put on was something of a surprise to Bull Dog Ben, who had fancied he could lead Chestnut away to where he could perform his little stock operation with less danger of interference. He had no fears about the success of the attack; but he was afraid that some other gang might come along and demand a dividend. The request to Augustus Adolphus was in reality nothing but a blind. He expected Chestnut Chink to look that way, and when the side of his face was presented to slug him.

Instead of that Chestnut sprung backward, and at the crack of a revolver began to yell. From the ear-splitting nature of his cries one might have supposed that he was half killed; but in fact it was just the other way. Augustus Adolphus, or whatever his name was, went down in a heap, with a red smutch on his forehead, and quivering like one at the last gasp.

"Curses! Who used that iron?" exclaimed Ben, drawing his own weapon, and glaring around.

"That'll empty the Hole quicker'n ef he'd yelled murder all night! Git him away of he ain't stiff, an' I'll rustle ther kid."

He spoke rapidly; and meantime his eyes roved about in search of the shooter, even as he sprang at Chestnut, who was crouching under the red lantern.

He was just too late to get him.

There was a trampling of feet on the stairs that led down into Hank's, and then a crowd rushed up, with Oregon at the front.

The man with the scar took in the situation at a glance. He caught Chestnut by the collar and twirled him behind him, without ever checking his own rush. When Chestnut was put out of the way that uncovered Ben; and as a step by each brought the two within distance Oregon let go a straight blow from the shoulder.

Bull Dog Ben was a heavy man, and had the reputation of being a bruiser; but there was no chance to guard against a stroke like that. He fell like a log.

"Now then, let's see what's goin' on hyar," said the sport, gazing keenly into the darkness!

Two men were helping away a third, and the trio vanished while he looked.

"Oh, they're jest a gang ov strippers, ez were goin' ter go through Chestnut," suggested a spectator, whom Oregon recognized as Happy Saul.

"Mebbe they've corraled his coin, an' mebbe they ain't. I'll find out; an' you keep yer eyes open fur Bull Dog Ben when he gits awake. He'll come back at yer fur ther size ov his pile."

It was hardly necessary to give this warning, for the sport's eyes had come back to the prostrate man. Oregon knew that he had bit hard; but he did not know how much punishment the other man could take; or whether his fist had reached a spot where it would do the most good.

Ben rose with a lurch, and, for an instant, was speechless, while he drew his sleeve over his eyes. Then he was himself again. Into his belt he thrust the revolver that had never left his hand, and he stepped forward with a steady tread.

"A good lick, that, pard. I sh'd jedge yer calls yerself a broozer, an' that's ther kind I like ter meet. You've got ter settle with me fur that clip yer got in on me unawares right hyar, an' now. After that mebbe ther town'll hev suthin' ter say to yer. Ef you wants ter go on ther war-path yer got ter sing out ye.' comin', or pay fer ther corpses thet drop when you shoot at large. They're kerryin' one off now; an' mebbe you'd hev put a hole in me ef yer hedn't found company war comin', an' ther reesk war gettin' bigger."

"Why, confound yer ugly picters! fur a cent I'd take yer over my knee, an' smack yer good fur yer dirty lyin'. Hyar's my shooters, a load in every bar'l. I didn't git out till all ther shootin' war over. Don't put on sidel Yer kin out ter meet ther boss fool ov Brace Box, an' he got erway with yer baggage. A softy don't hev ter holler fur help many times when Oregon's 'round."

"Then it war you ez hit me?"

"Put it down in yer di'ry. Ef yer bed stood a half-inch nearer you wouldn't 'a' bin talkin' to me now. Ef yer wants tur hev it over, put yer hands up an' say when yer wants me ter hit yer; but don't talk, I ain't one ov ther talkin' kind."

"You hit me whar yer kin; an' I'm a-comin' fur yer now."

The crowd was delighted. Disputes at Hank's were generally settled with knife or revolver, but two men who were willing to make an exhibition of their skill with Nature's weapons were always sure of an appreciative audience. Those who were deeply interested at the card table, and some of Pedro's patrons remained; but for the most part the crowd had deserted the cellar by this time, and were willing to speak words of encouragement quite promiscuously, or to take a hand in if needed to keep up the interest. There were plenty at Oregon's back to see fair play, or foul play either.

The light might have been better for a scientific display of the manly art; but it was good enough for the combatants to see each others' faces, and hands.

As everybody knew that the fight was for neither fun nor profit, on his side, Ben did not think it worth while to smooth the scowl from his face. He came up to the scratch with an evil light in his eyes; and without hesitation or delay sent a right-hander as hard as he could drive it; for it seemed to him that with his hands so far down Oregon could never parry it.

He never was more mistaken.

Oregon only seemed to turn his arm, and the fist went harmlessly by his head.

As an offset his own return was almost as neatly parried. Then they struck together three or four times, short yet ugly blows, that dropped to their places with a snap, and would have beaten an ordinary man to the ground. The difference in the punishment was that Oregon caught the strokes so nearly on the top of his head that they glanced on down without doing any great damage; while Bull Dog Ben caught the hard fist of his antagonist for the most part with his face.

The rally did not last long, for Oregon sprang

out of distance, popping his man with his left as he went.

"Time!" sung out some one who had some idea of ring contests in general without much knowledge in detail.

Oregon glanced over his shoulder, and his eye lit on Happy Saul.

A step or two brought him near to that worthy, who was cautiously craning his neck up from the cellarway.

"Hev yer got Chestnut out ov ther way?" the sport whispered.

"Bless yer soul, he got hisself out ov ther way. He didn't wait fur tickets, checks, er nothin'. Ef you'd 'a' gone erlong it would 'a' saved a heap ov trouble. Ef Killer, er Coldcard, er some ov them big guns don't turn up ter regulate ther crowd it's goin' ter be tough nuts fur yer mother's darlin'; an' mighty oncomfortable fur me."

Happy Saul belied his name, just then; for a more lachrymose whisper could hardly be imagined.

"What you got ter do with it, anyhow? You go hunt Chestnut, an' leave me ter toot my own horn," retorted Oregon, who had no time to pick his words since Bull Dog Ben was coming around again without any of the spectators having a suspicion of how nearly the seemingly slight temple-blow had knocked him out.

For a moment he had been half-dazed; but as he said nothing, and glared mechanically at his foe, his condition was not noticed. When his strength had fairly come back he put up his hands once more and stepped forward, a good deal quieter than when he began, but twice as wicked. The crowd had surged in during the temporary cessation of the fight, and at this sign of its renewal a little ring was again formed.

The act showed Oregon that it was expected there would be no shooting; and in his own mind he decided that there should not be much of anything else. He was as cool as the coolest as he edged forward to get within distance. It was not likely that any one would interfere until Ben had his chance. It was after the Bull Dog was knocked out that he knew he would have to keep his eyes open for the outside rush.

And knock him out he intended to. So far, there had seemed but little difference between them—Oregon alone knew the difference in the amount of punishment given and received. Unless Ben had kept a great deal back he was fit for little more than a chopping-block in the hands of a man like Oregon, desperate fighter though he was considered to be.

Foot to foot they stood, their hands almost touching, their arms weaving in and out, with now and then a feint. There were plenty of encouraging words for the tough, but he did not seem to heed them. The lesson of the first round had not been altogether thrown away on him, and he was waiting to see his chance.

The opening seemed to come at last, as Oregon with seeming carelessness, dropped his guard a trifle, and lounged back on his right foot.

Once, twice, Ben struck, left and right, with a strength that seemed likely to beat down any guard; and he was certain that the other could not take a backward step if he tried.

Oregon took care of himself.

He leaned slightly forward, parried with his left, guarded with his right, sent in as a return a powerful jab with his left, that landed squarely on the chin, and then followed it up, as Ben threw back his head, with one very straight and hard, that carried the whole weight of his body with it. Brace Box had never seen such a scientific blow before; and was quite unprepared for the result.

Back went Bull Dog Ben, dropping into a motionless heap; and he lay where he fell, bereft of sense and motion.

"Warp it to him, pard!" shouted a voice. "He's done fur Dave an' Ben, an' now's ther time ter git even!"

With a fierce snarl the whole crowd seemed to fall bodily on Oregon, and beat him to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN AT THE DOOR.

MERRY MAY had felt fairly well satisfied that it was only a bluff when the outside gang was mentioned, though, of course, it was possible, if she succeeded in escaping from the room, that she might meet some one to try to bar her way before reaching the open air.

She might have bound the insensible man, but time would have been taken that seemed very precious just then. If her judgment of how hard she struck was at all correct, he would not give any trouble for some time to come.

Anxious as she was to avoid bloodshed, it would have gone hard with any one who might have met her as she swung open the door and looked into the little passage. Her derringers were ready, and she would have shot without mercy.

Fortunately there was no one in sight.

The door closed behind her with a click, that suggested if there was a spring-lock on the inside there might be some means of fastening on the outside.

The passage was dark enough; but one of her matches showed her brace of bolts, above and below. She sprang them hastily into their sockets; and thus having made herself secure against an attack from the rear, she advanced more leisurely.

"A queer sort of a den this," she thought to herself, as the further door yielded to her touch, and she found herself in the open air.

"It shows the party has nerve, or they would never dare to fit up such an institution right in town. It ought not to be very hard to trace the ownership, and when that is found your finger drops on Cyril North. Of course, he didn't count on my getting away, but he might have looked that far ahead. A nice little thing Miss Viola might have dropped into; and where, oh, where would she have been under the circumstances? I'll know the place if I see it again with my eyes shut. Now it's time to report progress at headquarters. If they want to try it on, I've got the lost Cyril cooped for 'em. All they have to do is to come out in force, and gather him in. But you let I don't make any further move in this game until I know a little more about its ins and outs. I begin to see there's a heap of risk even if there is a big pile of money."

It seemed plain that the place had been prepared for a prison. It might have been used for other captives, or got up specially for this occasion; but, at present, it held the jailer; and from what Merry May had seen of it, she had no doubt it would do its duty until some one approached it from without.

Once she had a notion to watch for a time, in order, if possible, to discover some of Cyril's confederates; but the idea was abandoned almost as soon as suggested. They were of no great interest to her, and safety was what she was after just then. She turned away toward the central portion of the town.

Before going very far Merry May became aware that something interesting was going on. The hum of a crowd began to come quite distinctly to her ears.

She hastened her steps, ready to see what was to be seen, or run away on the shortest notice. In that frame of mind, the light in front of the entrance to the Hole in the Ground came into view, and the throng that was gathered under it, just at the moment when Oregon had knocked out Bull Dog Ben, and the friends of the latter were falling upon him *en masse*.

Such affairs were always distasteful to her, though, in the way of her profession, she had been compelled to face such scenes more than once. At first she thought of quietly flanking the spot, and leaving the roughs of Brace Box to their unhallowed diversions.

Then it struck her that she was more or less interested in both Oregon and Neville North, and that it was possible one of them might be the victim. She turned her steps again directly toward the crowd at hearing some one shout, "Slug ther stranger!" As she turned, a man went running lightly past, and she recognized him as Solid Sam. He went straight for the crowd; and behind him, with careful deliberation, losing ground at every step, went Happy Saul.

"Down in front!" sung out Sam, as he sprang into the crowd, swinging his burly shoulders.

"About half ov you fellers thet wants ter pard, jest try on yer game with me. He's a good man, he is, but I'm a slugger from Sluggerville! If thar's any over, I'll take ther balance. You, thar—quit!"

Half a dozen men were at Oregon, with more seemingly ready to take a hand when the original six got tired out, or if anything happened to them.

With this half-dozen, Oregon was having an interesting time, and acting as though he really enjoyed it. They were all in front of him, striking for keeps; but they were decidedly too thick to thrive. The sport, on guard, was coolly throwing their blows to this side and that, moving with an agility that was wonderful in a man of his size, and holding them at bay with but little effort.

At the first rush, not a man in the crowd had doubted that Oregon would go down. If he had not done so in the two or three minutes of skurry, no one was yet discouraged when he struck his first blow, as Solid Sam came bounding in to the rescue.

By that time the sport had his men all in a line, and was ready for the offensive. His shifts and dodges had not been understood until his work was fairly in. He let go left and right, left and right, while, with every blow a man went down. One after another they dropped, just like ten-pins. That was what Sam meant when he shouted, "Down in front!"

An instant later he was yelling something else, as he saw a pistol-barrel glistening, and knew that the programme was about to change.

The man addressed quit—and it was a great chance that he did not quit permanently, for Ryan reached for the back of his neck, and had his time and distance all right.

"Now, then, what's the racket?" he added, as he placed himself by the side of Oregon, a revolver in each hand.

"I guess yer know me, Solid Sam. You kin

b'lieve that when I talk I mean somethin', an' I'm talkin' now. Ain't he givin' yer fun enough with his fists, that you want to mount him with the irons? I reckon he didn't start this; if he did, ain't you able for him, all in a gang? If not, go put yer heads ter soak an' leave sport fer better men. You hear me?"

It was not often Solid Sam draws his tools so early in the game; when he did he meant business, every time. If Bull Dog Ben had still been on deck to hold his crowd up to their work, there might have been a lively time, even for Brace Box; but his friends were not entirely anxious to open the ball, with Sam Ryan looking at them after that style.

As for Oregon, he folded his arms and looked on with a pleasant smile. If he had not set a clean copy for other fighting men to pattern by, he was willing that Ryan should show him how it ought to be done.

"They don't seem ter hear me!"

Things seemed to have come around to a dead-lock again. A couple of men were examining into Ben's condition, but the rest, though making no aggressive signs, were eying Oregon with anything but friendly looks. If Ryan stepped out of the road it wasn't much of a conundrum what they would try to do to the stranger sport. Sam saw it, and grew wrathful.

"We hear you, Sam, and I don't mind saying we hate to crowd a friend of yours; but he's shot one man, and broke Ben's neck when he offered to take up for his pard. If times were like they used to was, he'd have been swinging from yonder hook by this time. He knocked down half a dozen of us when we tried to take him, but that don't count on the indictment. We don't bear him any malice for that last, for it was worth a swelled head just to see the fun. But if you mean to keep on regulating Brace Box, it looks to me as though you ought to run him in yourself, and hold him till we see how it all turns out."

The speaker was back in the crowd, and it was not easy to see him; but Sam knew the voice well enough, and the words sounded as though the fellow believed them, sure enough. Tom Wells sometimes trained with a bad crowd, but he had a way about him of telling the truth and a reputation of being better than his surroundings.

"That's all right, Tommy; that's the way you see it, but your eyesight is not just as good as it might be, and maybe you'll stand to one side until this thing is straightened out. You hardly mean to say that he jumped your whole gang? and if he began by shooting it's mighty odd that he wound up with ther sluggin'. Say, sport, how is it?"

"You can look over my tools," responded Oregon, "and I'll lay a thousand dollars ter ten that yer finds a load in each barr'l. Whoever done ther shootin' got in his work afore I got outen ther cellar. I war buckin' Pedro's leetle monte lay-out when I heerd a yell, an' I knowed they war mountin' Chestnut Chink fur a leetle stake he made. I'd just struck a lucky streak but I left my luck on ther table an' run to ther rescue. Ther shootin' war over afore I chipped."

"You hear that, Tommy? I'm bettin' on that bein' ther true facts in ther case. It ain't no use fur you fellers ter be layin' 'round hyar. Ther fun's stopped, an' I'm takin' ther sport 'long with me. You kin figger this thing over tell to-morrer, an' then I'll guarantee he'd be ready ter walk up to ther captain's office to settle if thar's anythin' ter settle. But ef this crowd wants ter slug me, I'm ready fur it, jest too quick. Come along, sport. Yer friend are lookin' fur you, an' this thing's settled fur keeps."

"Come er go, it's all ther same ter me. Ef you think it's the thing ter leave, I'm travelin' right along with yer; or ef I ought to wade into that crowd, give me ther wink an' I'll show yer fun surprisin'. Chestnut hez cleared out, an' I guess ther's nothin' ter keep me hyar. What's ther time, anyway?"

"Along about midnight. Hook on!"

Oregon gave a low whistle of surprise when told what hour it was. In fact he could hardly believe that time had flown so swiftly since he had come into Hank's "Hole." Merry May had probably come, and gone. He took Sam's arm and strode away without demur or further hesitation.

When the two had gone a short distance a slenderly-built young fellow, dressed in good clothes, hailed them.

"You did that nicely, gents. For a moment or two I thought you would have your hands full catching lead. If you are going toward Jimmy's, can't you take a fel'ow along?"

Ryan stared at the speaker, but Oregon recognized Merry May at once.

"Ov course you kin ketch on; an' glad I am ter see you alive and able. I've bin foolin' away my time jest too lovely fur any use. You bin thar?"

"I have, indeed; and got away, as the good book says, by the skin of my teeth! I want to see the Norths as soon as I can. They haven't let me into their game any further than they ought to, but I think I can tell them something that will do them good. If they need the miss-

ing Cyril very badly, I think they can have him if they're right down spry about morning. I left him in a coop."

"I don't know much more about 'em than you do; but ef talk goes, that's what they're wanting. We'll hustle along, anyhow."

They made good time, and Merry May could not remember many moments she had lost since her escape, but as they reached the steps that led up to Jimmy's hotel, she saw a young man turning away. Undoubtedly he had seen her, and just as certainly recognized the party she had left a prisoner.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CASE OF CYRIL NORTH.

MERRY MAY gave no sign that she recognized the figure that seemed to melt away in the darkness. On the contrary she stepped straight forward, perhaps increasing her rate of speed a little, her tongue all the time running as glibly as ever.

Ryan kept beside her, but as she placed her foot upon the step lately vacated by the shadow, she cast a careless glance over her shoulder.

To her surprise Oregon was not in sight.

It was on the end of her tongue to call to him softly, but second thought suggested that it was possible the sport had seen the individual she believed to be Cyril North, and intended to hang upon his heels and learn something more about him.

She wished now that she had at once told him about her adventure, and promised herself to do it the first thing in the morning, whatever might be the result of the conference with the Norths that she was now seeking.

It had been her intention to tell Oregon hastily who the individual was that had just sauntered away from Jimmy's, and suggest his making an effort to learn where he went to. If he was doing it of his own accord, it at least showed that they were both of one mind.

"Ask no questions," she said, in a low tone, to Ryan.

"Oregon is off on business, and it's not likely he will turn up again for an hour or so; it's just as well not to let the world know it. Unless you have something especial to say to Neville North, bid me good-night and come again. I do not hesitate to trust you, but for the present it might make confusion. On second thought—where can you be found for the next hour?"

"Business first, all the time. I'll meander round past Hank's, to see how them roughs take their set-back, and then bring up at Billy's Bower. Unless you need me don't send; but I'll wait an hour on the chance."

Before starting on her evening out Merry May had learned the location of Viola North's room. On leaving Solid Sam she went straight to it.

Jimmy's caravansarie was moderately well constructed. Though the main dormitory was partitioned up in a make-shift sort of way, that gave little privacy, there were a few little rooms that were almost worthy of the name.

One of these had been placed at Miss North's disposal.

Under the door there was now a faint streak of light, but Merry May scarcely expected to find the occupant awake, as she knocked softly on a panel.

There was no answer or sound, and she rapped a little harder, an expression of disgust appearing on her face.

"It does strike me that after what she has learned about Brace Box, it wouldn't hurt to keep one eye open. There ought to be no danger at Jimmy's; but one can never tell."

It was not from the expectation of finding it free that she raised the latch of the door and gave a push. Her own room had a bolt; this was probably like it; and it was not likely that Viola would neglect to secure the fastening before retiring—she thought, rather, that the click of the latch would have more effect than a pounding on the door. Great was her surprise, then, when the door yielded to her touch, and swung open.

"Something wrong," Merry muttered. "The girl's not an idiot. What's in the wind now?"

It only needed a glance to show that Viola was not in the room at all.

The lamp was burning at about half its regular brightness, probably as it had been turned down for the night, and the bed showed the imprint of a form, though the covering had not been turned back. It was as if Viola had thrown herself there, all dressed as she was, to rest before retiring.

It seemed more than likely that she had then temporarily left the room—she might be, even now, conversing with her cousin—but Merry was by no means satisfied, and made a careful inspection.

There was nothing to indicate foul play. The few belongings that Miss North had brought with her, all seemed to be there. There was no disarrangement of the furniture to point toward a struggle.

"All the same, I'll bet somewhere in the neighborhood of three to one that the child has been carried off, or lured away, and is now in danger. Where's Neville, I wonder? I must see him at once if he can be seen. Heavens!

this is going to be no child's play, but a game for life and death with revolvers for trumps, and your humble servant on what looks now to be the losing side. There's no particular reason why I should stay there, for they haven't seemed any too anxious to have me, I'll vow. If the wicked cousin has got her somewhere, I'd like to know just where it can be—and I'll find out, too, before a year."

Once more she looked over the whole room, without being made any the wiser. Then she hastily began a search for Neville.

There was no difficulty in finding his room, and at his door there was no delay. At the first knock there was a response.

Neville, from within, heard a brief statement. By the time the girl gambler closed, he was settled in his garments and had the door open.

"A strange thing it is," he said, trying to take the intelligence coolly.

"She should have too much sense to leave her room this time in the night; yet I do not see how she could be dragged away without any alarm being given. I do not suppose I have been asleep over ten minutes, and I would have heard anything like a cry or a struggle. I will look over the ground myself. I wish Oregon was here, but I suppose he has not come in yet."

"He was with me a moment before I came in, but turned back, I think, to follow the man you are searching for—your cousin, Cyril."

"Cyril! Then you have found him—you have told him of our object? What said he? Did he offer any excuse for his treatment of Viola and myself?"

"I am afraid he is not the kind that offers excuses—even with a revolver at his ear. If you consider the matter you may remember that I am not very far in your confidence; and could not well explain what I didn't know. I did the best I could, under the circumstances, and fancy that the guesses made were not very far off from the truth. I can assure you I don't want to solidify the friendships I made this evening, in your interests. It would be too dangerous. By the way, Ryan came with us as far as the door, and left his address for the next hour. If we need him I will know where to send."

They were back in Viola's room by this time, and Neville was already looking keenly around.

"Ah, what is this?" he exclaimed, pointing to an envelope that lay upon the table, the lamp resting upon one corner.

"I should surmise it was a letter," remarked Merry May.

"It may explain one mystery; but I declare it's a greater one in itself. How did it get there? It wasn't there when I went in search of you. Things begin to look dangerous."

Neville caught up the letter.

It was addressed to him, in a clear, running hand, that was totally unfamiliar.

That of itself was sufficient to show that there was something mysterious about Miss North's disappearance.

With nervous haste he tore open the envelope, failing to hear a word of what Merry May had just said.

The letter inside was brief; but very explanatory. It ran something like this:

"MY DEAR COUSIN:—You have enjoyed the society of our charming cousin so long that no doubt you begin to feel that you have a prescriptive right to it. For fear you should urge this view too forcibly, and thus widen the old and unfortunate breach, I have judged it best not to meet you at this time; but will undoubtedly see you later. Meantime Viola goes with me, and as our movements are uncertain I leave no address. When our arrangements are completed I have no doubt that you will hear from her. In anticipation I would advise that you have all the coin available that you possibly can. I have observed that those who do business with me usually need it. Give my love to the gentle Oregon. Good-by, and luck go with you."

"Affectionately, "CYRIL."

He read this to an end, then handed it to Merry May, seating himself on the one chair the room contained, his chin resting between his hands, and his face giving evidence of extreme dejection.

"Seems pretty certain of his victim," said the latter, glancing hastily over this singular epistle.

"But how did he get her away?"

"How? Can't you see? Wheedled her away with his infernal, oily tongue, just as I told her he would. He could charm a saint out of paradise if he chose. He can fascinate and deceive her as often as he tries."

"Jealous, my lord; jealous, and half-cracked! That's what's the matter with you. I begin to see toward the bottom of this mix a good deal faster than I did. You won't be much good in this deal. I think I'd better wait till Oregon comes."

"And what can Oregon do?"

"Help me get your cousin out of the clutches of a bad man from Bodie. Help me to look up her trail, of which there must be some traces. He will know where Cyril is when he comes back."

"Trail! Of what use to attempt to follow it? The ruffian is a will-of-the-wisp at any time. Now, when he has wheedled Viola to him, he

will vanish like a flash of summer lightning, and will be seen no more."

"Don't be alarmed over that. If there's any truth in this half-million or so that I've been talking about, he'll get around in its neighborhood, sooner or later. Cyril North has just as much respect for that amount of coin as you or any other man has. If there's a chance to corra. it he will be there. But if I am to do anything in the matter I can't wait for that time. He's not likely to move for a little while, and he may wait considerably longer. Make up your mind quick. Either brace up and be a man, or jump the game and I'll look for a better partner. I don't often make mistakes, and I'm open to high odds I know Miss Viola a heap sight better than you. It would simplify matters if you would tell me what all this racket is about, but I don't want to intrude. If she's in Cyril North's hands I know enough to be certain she could not well be in worse; and I'm going to work accordingly."

"What need to tell you more of the story than you already seem to know?"

The young man still spoke moodily, but the bitter tones, as much as the words of Merry May, seemed to have had some effect.

"There is no great mystery about it, Heaven knows. The three of us were children together, though Cyril was the oldest. He grew away from me, fast enough; the three years between him and me was ever so much more difference than the seven between him and Viola."

"He had gone to the bad long before it was suspected. When he disappeared, and a day or two later, every one was saying that he had robbed the bank in which he held a clerkship of twenty thousand dollars, no one was more surprised than we—that he killed the watchman we never believed."

"We were three orphans, you understand, who had been received into the family of our aunt as fast as we were left parentless. She was more than a mother to us, when we needed a friend. Without her we might have starved, or gone to the poor-house. She was rich, while we were poorer than poverty."

"Cyril was the first taken, and the favorite. She took care of us, but she loved him. If nothing had happened he would have been her heir. It was a fortune worth working for, too."

"She gave him thousands, first and last, and would have given him thousands more if he had stayed to take them. It seems he and Viola had some sort of a quarrel, and he left without notice to any one."

"Then came the explosion about the bank, and for years Viola blamed herself for having driven him to desperation. Aunt Trueman altered her will, leaving all her wealth to us two."

"She died suddenly, and at her last gasp tried to tell something, no one knew what."

"It was only a few months ago we discovered what she meant—her last will. In it enough was left Viola and me to make us comfortable, but the balance was in trust. If Cyril's innocence of the crime at the bank was proved, and he returned in five years, the bulk of her fortune went to him."

"Well, his innocence has been proved, sure enough. The men that did it have been hung for the crime, and now Viola wants him to come back and take his half million. And I was fool enough to help her search for him. I suspected it would end in some such way; and now I know it."

"Very interesting reading that would all make if written out in full. You forgot to add that you young gentlemen were in love with your cousin, and that she didn't care three cents for either of you. I fancy there is something more that you might have told me, but that makes no difference. Are you sure that Cyril North wrote this letter?"

The abrupt question startled Neville. He looked again at the paper that he held in his hand.

"It is not his writing as I remember it; but he was a master of the pen. He could counterfeited any hand he chose. No other could have written it."

"And I saw him leave here, alone, but a few moments before I wakened you. I don't understand his game," said May, musingly.

"Well, you can moon around, and lose all the valuable time you want; I'll go out and look for Oregon or Solid Sam. I'm going to nose this thing out, and I want some one in it that I can tie to. Good-morning, Mr. Buckley, I'll see you later."

"Of all fools a jealous fool is the worst," she said to herself, as she left him to eat his heart out if he would."

"Perhaps he's told me the truth, and perhaps he's told me the whole truth; but I somehow suspect an Ethiopian in the edifice. Anyhow, I know the story they've got to tell when they want to talk. A little judicious pum:ing will show what Oregon thinks of things—and it's time to be hunting up his trail. He's a good young man, but something may happen to him. If Master Neville don't know enough to sound Jimmy Bower I'll leave him alone. He won't know anything, anyhow."

She was out of the hotel and in the darkness. Ryan was the man she wanted to find first of all, and she started for the Bower at a brisk pace.

For all her preoccupation she gave a sudden spring, that barely carried her out of reach of a heavy blow. Then a hoarse voice shouted:

"Han's up, youngster. We'll try an' look fur that diamond ag'in. Ef we'd on'y knowed it war thar, I reckon it'd saved ther second trip."

CHAPTER XIV.

SOLID SAM SHOWS HIS SCIENCE.

THE actions of the two men showed Merry May what they were, and their words told something more. In fact, it was a whole revelation.

The other "trip" had been made by tools of Cyril North—here they were again. Cyril had told her that he had placed himself where he could overhear her conversation with Mrs. Morrison; but was that the truth? If not, then this mention of the diamond showed that Cyril and the handsome woman, who lived up the gulch, were in each other's confidence.

Some such suspicion had already crossed her mind, though it had, at the time, made little impression. Now it came back to her like a flash, as she heard the rough address of the footpad.

It was not hard to guess the reason why the ruffian spoke.

He would have knocked her senseless if he could, and perhaps used a knife afterward, without a grain of compunction; but he did not want to run the risk of bringing any spectators on the carpet, as he might do if he used his pistol at once, so he tried what virtue there was in a threat.

If he had known it he never tried a more dangerous game in his life. Merry May generally walked with her hands in her pockets when she was alone and it was after dark. Her fingers were on her derringers now, and there was just one thing that saved the men.

"They come from the other North, and, if I give them the chance, sooner or later they'll go back to him. It's the key to the situation, if Oregon does not already hold it."

This to herself; then, aloud:

"You infernal fools! Do you think you can trap me twice in one night—or, if you could, I'd run the same risks over again? The only thing of value I carry now is cold lead, and you'll get that by the bucketful if you don't put down your hands and climb along the road to cooler quarters. You hear me?"

How it was done the assailants did not see; but her derringers sprung out, looked them in the face, took away their breath, and made them wish that when they drew their own weapons they had pulled the hammers back.

"Drop that idea of shooting," she added.

"Don't try it on. Really, I am old business, spelled with an awful big B. I mean every word I say, and can do the whole of it in style just too sweet for any use. If you don't travel down the road, you go up the divide; I don't much care which."

"It makes a heap sight difference ter us," was the quick retort of the spokesman.

"We cave, seein' both bowers an' the ace be ag'in' us. Jest consider ez though nothin' had happened. You go your way, leavin' us to go ourn. Don't be brash now. Ef you lets go an' misses, good-by, John! Start a racket hyar, an' thar won't be no sense tryin' ter keep dark. We'll hev yer coin, an' you with yer toes up, afore the fu'st man gits hyar."

"I understand the position exactly, and am not giving away any chances. You go first, and go at once. I'm not bloodthirsty, but I'm not giving you a show at my back. Step out, and lively, or I begin to shoot. Last warning. Go!"

There was a dangerous glitter in her eye, and her fingers trembled on the triggers. It did not do to wait too long, and, much as she hated to shoot, the last minute had arrived.

Off stepped the two, with hands gratuitously raised above their heads. They did not run, but the long strides showed that they did not intend to lose time about their going. Already their forms were beginning to merge with the darkness.

"Light as cats they step. I must say they understand their trade. It won't do to let them get too far out of sight. They might double and come back on me."

Merry May was watching keenly, while she thought. It might have been just as well if she had paid a little attention to the other points of the compass. Without a word of warning, a third man rose at her back and sprung at her shoulders.

There was no sound, or warning of any kind, until an arm was around her neck. By that time, it was too late for successful resistance.

The party who made this new attack was master of his business. His right forearm was under Merry May's chin, and with his left hand he pressed it heavily against her throat. A minute or two of that would choke the life out. Meantime, what chance was there for escape?

She had not yet seen this new aggressor, but she heard a low whistle, just at her ear that must be his.

At the sound the fugitives began hurriedly to retrace their steps. They had played their part very well—saved their own bacon, and given the partner in the background his chance. Had Merry even suspected his presence she would have shot when they were under her derringers.

"Go slow, pard," continued the returning leader, in a low growl.

"Don't hold on to that soft little throat a trifle too long or ther' may be a pious pic-nic with ther boss. Ther' warn't no objection ter a little rough play; but, he drew ther line hard afore murder. Killin' in self-defense, only."

"Who's thinkin' of murder, cuss ye! At my time ov life d'yer think I don't know how hard I'm grippin'? Jest turn them pockets inside out, an' see that this time yer git all ov 'em. Hyar! Let's take a squint at them fingers afore yer begins. It's too dark hyar to see straight, but it's better ter take a look afore we begins ther totin'; suthin' else might happen on ther road."

"I'm willin'; but ye'r' sure ther little cuss can't shoot? Sure he ain't bin splatterin' 'round?"

"Ha, ha! Jest cast yer optics this way, an' you'll see how ther thing order be done. Whar's ther chance? See? What's my elbows fur if it ain't ter hold them wrists? Oh, I bin thar afore, an' I never slight a job."

"Glad ter hear it, old man. I sha'n't feel half so sad ef I break yer neck."

The voice belonged to Solid Sam, and if his words were a warning he had a reason for them. He knew it was the quickest and safest way to have the gambler drop his victim.

It worked to a charm. With an oath the ruffian cast Merry May from him—and then went down before a crushing bit on the side of the head. Then Ryan wheeled to meet the rush of the startled, but by no means terrified two.

They had courage enough of a certain kind, and as long as they were not under the drop, were willing to take the chances at two to one. There was a glitter of steel as they came, but though Sam caught it, the sight did not put him any more on his guard. He sprung to one side, striking as he went; but that movement was only a feint. The rough on that side gave back a step or two, separating himself that much the more from his partner. The blow could not have reached him, but he had seen how hard such strokes fell when they connected, and it made him wary.

Without a pause Ryan dodged back, in appearance offering a fair mark for the man with a knife, who at once delivered a wicked thrust. It was what Sam wanted and expected. The descending wrist dropped into his hand, which closed around it like a vise.

A fierce wrench sent the blade spinning.

Ryan's other hand clutched the opposite shoulder, and a furious swing sent him flying against his partner, who was just rushing in again.

All abroad were the two at the collision, and Sam had everything his own way. Left and right he struck at the two heads. Dark though it was, the strokes were of the kind that needed no repeating.

He knew that so well that he did not trouble himself to look after the result. Stooping, he caught up Merry May as though she was a child, and hastened toward Jimmy's.

Hardly had they got out of the shadow when he became aware of the fact that his burden was returning to life, or making a strong manifestation of the life that remained within.

"I'm all right now," she whispered.

"Let me down. The villains must not get away until my eyes are on them again. Quick! Don't you see? I will lose my chance."

"Sorry fur tber party ez picks it up, then. That's all I got ter say. I sh'd hev thought yer hed got about enough gruel ter take ther edge off yer appetite. But hev it ez yer chooses."

Down she came to the ground, though Sam steadied her a little, with his hands on her shoulders as he placed her on her feet. He saw that she was excited, and did not understand the reason. He could hardly believe that a woman would be so wild for vengeance as to attack three ruffians, from whom she had just escaped, by something less than a miracle.

"I haven't time to fully explain," she hurriedly whispered.

"Those men are but the paid tools of the master I am searching for. They have come from him within the last hour. As they have failed in their work it is most likely they will go right back to him. If I follow them I find him. He is the man who took Neville North out of the Bower the other night in the face of you all. Now he has captured Neville's cousin every bit as mysteriously. It may be the last chance to find him. I am all right now, let me go."

"Don't be excited, little one. You're getting there fast enough, and as fer Solid Sam, he'll go 'long. They might drop ter yer game, an' make it jest too interestin' fur any use. Better

not talk till we git 'back. I don't s'pose it's goin' ter take us long, an' ef we find out once who they be the rest won't be a hard job. I think I've dropped to 'em now. Steady, now. No talk, and we'll have a chance, maybe, to see what they are up to."

Sam knew it was small use to be in a hurry. He had bit hard all three of the men, and some of them would not be ready to travel for a little.

Sure enough, when they had cautiously approached the scene of the late fray, having made something of a circle during their absence, the three were still on the spot.

Two had recovered their senses fully, but the third seemed to be all abroad. He was being held up by his friends, who, also, were carefully examining his head.

"Blame him!" muttered one, "he hit heavy enough ter drive a spike. Ef Jim's skull ain't clean stove in I'll be mighty glad ter know it."

"Less trouble ef it's wide open then ef it's only half cracked," answered the other. "Ther sooner we light out ther better, an' dog-gone my tail-feather ef I want ter kerry him! Kinskassly walk meself."

"Don't crowd it. Thar's no bones broke. He's beginnin' ter short, an' kin move in a minnit."

The fellow was a true prophet, for their mate revived rapidly. In a few moments the three moved away; and at a safe distance in the rear followed Sam and Merry May.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. CHINK'S TRIBULATION.

MERRY MAY had not been mistaken when she decided that Oregon followed in the wake of the young man she saw turning away from Jimmy's. Only, she was altogether wrong as to his having the faintest suspicion of his being Cyril, or that he was doing anything that would be to the advantage of Viola North or her cousin.

If he had been questioned, he might have had some trouble in finding a plausible excuse for his actions. About all he could have said, was that there seemed something strangely familiar about the party, and he felt impelled to learn more about him.

There was no great difficulty in stalking the game. Cyril, or whoever it was, walked on in a thoughtful mood, and though he looked around now and then, in a way that suggested uneasiness, Oregon, after a little, decided that the action was mechanical.

"Used ter bein' follere!; er, if not, ort ter be. Dunno what I'm foolin' time fer, crawlin' round after him; but somehow I hev ter do it. I'll see whar he's goin' now, an' mebbe, ter-morrer, I'll look him over by daylight. I've made plenty ov friends over ther left in my time, but I don't recommember any I'd keer ter pipe this hour ov ther night. Thar war one person I'd 'a' follered this hyer way; but that person's dead. Thunder! I'll drop it, afore I make a rank fool ov myself."

Yet Oregon did not drop it.

It was instinct that brought him on that trail; and against his will he followed it for some time. He laughed at himself for doing it; but in spite of the laugh, he went on, until at last, he began to think he was doing duty service as well as pleasure. There was something like a development.

"Hillo! This bergins ter look familier a bit! What in blazes be he goin' ter do round hyer?"

To his intense surprise, the man stopped at Chestnut Chink's little dug-out. If the sport with a scar had not dropped with more suddenness than grace he would undoubtedly have been discovered. Not having noticed the slackening of the speed of the other he had approached a good deal nearer than was safe if he wished to avoid discovery.

Fortunately, the glance around was only cursory; when Oregon looked up the man had disappeared.

"Reckon he's gone into the shanty; but what would he be doin' thar—unless he wanted chink fur biz. Wants a letter kerried, mebbe. Whew! that's an idear. Wonder ef he ain't ther chap that writ t'other one! I'll hev ter look inter this a bit."

The new suspicion struck him with a suddenness that almost took away his breath. He remained crouched on the ground, watching the dug-out as well as he could; and seeing nothing suspicious. He was sure a cat could not get away without his seeing it.

After some little time he began to grow suspicious. Chestnut might not be at home. If he was, what kept the stranger?

In the rear of the dug-out, when the gable projected from the ground there was a little three-light sash, and he determined to see if he could not get a view of the interior from that point.

He crept rather than walked to the spot, and as he neared it was gratified at seeing a streak of light running away from the window to the darkness.

All was silent within. Listening a moment, Oregon stooped down.

The room inside was small, rough and dirty. There was a bunk in one corner, with some straw, and a ragged old quilt, in the middle of

the place a small table, made of short, rough boards. On one corner of it was stuck a candle, that gave a fair light, and showed Chestnut Chink seated on a bench with a handful or two of money spread out before him.

He was evidently counting over his gains of the evening, and his face, on which the light of the candle shone fairly, showed an intense satisfaction that did Oregon good to see. Each denomination by itself Chestnut separated the coin in little piles, all the time chuckling to himself.

"He got away with it, sure enough," thought Oregon.

"The little vagabond! He don't know any more what to do with it than a turkey with Thanksgiving, an' he'll jest blow it all back to-morrow, if the boys don't go through him ter-night. Looks mighty much ez though I was clean off my base, though. Don't see no sign ov ther stranger. Unless he skipped while I war crawlin' up to ther winder I've fooled myself, big. An' it ain't much use ter ask Chestnut questions. He ain't ther kind ez kin be got ter give a clean answer; which are ther advantedge ov bein' a fool. Shell I roust him out; er let ther thing slide? I b'lieve I'll bunch my cards, an' wait fer a new deal."

If looks went for anything there was nothing to be learned from Chestnut Chink. No visitor of importance could he have had, judging from his manner now; and as there was no use in calling him out for nothing, Oregon turned away.

A hundred yards or more he had gone when he suddenly caught sight of three flures, that looked more like shadows than anything else, as they moved noiselessly toward him, in the darkness.

He was on his guard now, and dropped to the ground in time.

"A fool fur luck! was his comment.

"I kin see what I war drawn hyar fur. By ther rollin' wheels! I b'lieve its Bull Dog Ben and his gang, after ther coin. I'll take a hand in on that an' this time some one's likely ter git hurt."

Of course it would not do to attack this party unless some overt act was committed. Tough though Bull Dog Ben might be, the man who shot him down in cold blood would have to look out for his neck when discovered. Merely to find him wandering near Chestnut Chink's dug-out was not sufficient reason for opening fire.

When Chestnut began to shout murder would be the appropriate time to appear on the scene; and for that moment Oregon patiently waited.

The three passed at a distance of only a few yards. When fairly by, they stopped, looked around, and listened. Then, to Oregon's surprise they bounded away, as if an army were hot pursuit. He could hear the footsteps past Chestnut's door without slackening, and they grew fainter and fainter until he could hear them no longer.

How many pair of feet were making the sounds beyond the dug-out?

That was the question Oregon asked himself. There might be three pair, but he fancied he could only detect two. It the latter, why had the other pair halted at Chestnut Chink's? It was too late to find the fugitives, but this time he intended to rout out Chink and give him a caution if he could get no information.

He rose cautiously, his eyes fixed in the direction of the hole in the bill, and was startled at hearing a voice directly behind him:

"Hold on, pard, I guess it's no use, I have them spotted in my note-book, but they've took to ther woods fur ter-night. Hyar's a leetle woman lookin' fur you, an' I guess you're wanted ter chip inter another game."

"Not another game, but a fresh deal," added Merry May.

"I started out to look for you, and ran into that outfit. If Mr. Ryan had not arrived to the rescue, I do not know what would have become of me. Before we say anything else, one question. Did you follow a young man from in front of Jimmy's? If you did, what became of him—where is he now?"

"I did, fur a fact," responded Oregon, without trying to hide his perplexity.

"I got this fur, an' thought I had him holed up yonder. But he give me the slip, too cute fur anything. I got a squint inside, an' ther war no one thar but Chestnut, hisself, an' he war countin' ther coin he made buckin' ther grizzly, so I knowed nothin' hed skeered him. What war that gang up to?"

"They waylaid me, for robbery, anyhow; and perhaps murder; and they came from that young man you followed. It's suspicious that they should so nearly meet here. Perhaps, if we were to follow on we might find their tryst-place; and hear what they will say about the contract they just failed to fill. They have a den of some kind, not very far away, that much is sure."

"An' who war ther young man?"

"Cyril North!"

Oregon gave utterance to a long-drawn whistle.

"But that is not the worst of it. Cyril North has carried away his cousin. We must spot him if we ever want to see her again. The young man up at Jimmy's is an interesting in-

dividual, no doubt; but just now he is what you would call no good. He has thrown up his hand, and seated himself to swear."

"How do yer know ther Cyril hes ter?" queried Oregon, not paying much attention to the rest of Merry May's statements.

"He left a note saying so. Just to stir up the bile of his cousin a little more he wrote a letter giving himself all away. The idiot!"

"Would yer b'lieve him under oath?"

"There is something in that view of the case. I wouldn't have thought of it if you hadn't mentioned it. I don't know that I could. But if she's not in his hands, where is she? Its certain that she has disappeared."

"That's ter find out. Hev ter commence at head-waters, an' run ther trail out. Guess we'll let this little party rest as she are; say not?"

The plan for following the three assailants had seemed a brilliant inspiration at the outset; but by this time Miss May had found it was not as easy as she had imagined. They had faded away, and it was not likely that anything but pure luck would enable her to stumble over them again. There was now no doubt in her mind but that a rendezvous with Cyril North had been appointed somewhere in this neighborhood. While she was searching for that, without much chance of success, the scent at Jimmy's would be getting colder and colder.

"I'll tell you," she said, after a momentary hesitation.

"Let's interview Mr. Chink. He may have some information. If he has not, we'll go back to Bower's, as you suggest."

"All right. I'll roust him out," retorted Oregon.

Then he approached the hut in the bank, and applied his knuckles sharply to the door, shouting:

"Chestnut! hillo, thar! I say, thar, hillo!"

The answer was least of all what he expected, for it came in the shape of a groan.

"Some skulduggery," growled Oregon; but when the groan was repeated he flung himself, shoulder forward, against the door, and went crashing into the dug-out.

The room was darkness itself, but by the light of a match they quickly discovered Chestnut on the floor, bound hand and foot.

CHAPTER XVI.

FACE TO FACE.

WHERE was Viola? Well, she didn't know herself, at this time; or for an hour or two later. After the lessons already received one would have thought she would have been extra careful. She really thought she had been; but if so her caution did her no good when it was not needed, and when it was, unfortunately, it was not there.

The way of it was simply this:

She had left her room, of her own accord, in search of Jimmy, and met him coming in search of her.

He held up his hand a little mysteriously.

"Sh! It's all right! Yer cousin wants ter see yer a minnit in ther dinin'-room. Sez he bez suthin' ter say ter ye thar. Jest drift that way ez though yer ain't no great call fur goin' anywhar. You'll find him right thar, whar yer hed supper."

"Thanks! I will go directly."

She turned her head in the direction of the room without asking any further questions.

"What is it, Neville? I was beginning to feel uneasy about you."

There was not a shadow of suspicion in Viola's mind as she entered the dining-room, where a single small lamp served to dimly show the rough, long table, and the empty benches, together with the man who sat at the further end with his head on his hand, and his elbow on the table.

He looked as though he might be despondent, or in mental trouble; or perhaps desirous of a private interview. For this reason she held her peace until she stood at his shoulder, and recognized his face and figure. So quietly had she passed down the room that she doubted if he had noted her presence until her words broke into his reverie.

"Matter enough," was the gloomy answer, the man never looking up, though there was no difficulty in recognizing his tones, low as they were.

"It's a wild-goose chase we are on. And the sooner we leave here the better. I have seen again the party; and it is not Cyril."

"Not Cyril? Pardon me, but there cannot be yet another such a case of resemblance. There are no more cousins in the bushes—no other relative to be your living picture."

"And even if it should be, girl—and I am very sure that it is not—and he persists in avoiding us? Evidently he suspects something, yet so anxious to know what it is, to his advantage, that we have to tell him. Then would it not be wisest to let him show his hand? If he comes to the front of his own accord, so much the better. If he does not, there will be about half a million reasons why we should be consoled. Why not let the poor devil go?"

"That is still another side to the case. First, you say we have not found him at all, and then you want to let him alone. What next? You

have heard or seen something that you are keeping back from me. What is it? You did not use to have such peculiar notions. No one was more anxious than you when the quest started."

"And you are determined on running him to the ground, no matter how he may double or strive to escape?"

"If you put it in that shape, yes. The truth suits me very well. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Now tell me what you have learned, or seen, to-night. Something, for you were not so half-hearted when you left me a few hours ago."

The conversation was held in a tone hardly above a whisper, but both were very much in earnest. The two were standing now, and near an open window. It seemed nothing strange that he leaned over, raising his left forefinger in something like a gesture for silence. There was a mystery somewhere; certainly Viola would never have expected danger then and there. Even when his right arm dropped suddenly around her waist, she was a little indignant, but not much startled.

After that the time to help herself by words or act was past. The arm around her closed like a vise, the other hand shut down over her mouth; and, save that she had a bazy idea of being lifted from the floor and passed out through an open window, she knew no more.

When, at last, she recovered her senses, it was to find herself riding in front of a horseman, whose burly arms and towering figure could hardly be mistaken for those belonging to either Neville or Cyril North.

By the side of this man rode another, his equal in build, and his like in general appearance.

Both were silent, and they sent their horses along at a swinging trot that got over the ground at a rapid rate. From the motion, it was not hard for Viola to guess that they were following an upward trail that led into the mountains.

For a moment or so after her first start she lay quiet in the fellow's arms, gathering her wandering strength. When she spoke, her voice was still husky, yet stronger by far, and steadier, than she expected.

"Who are you, men? Where are you taking me?"

"Gadley's Gang, marm. That answers all both ov yer questions; an' gives 'bout ez much infurmashun ez it's ther squar' thing ter ax. Ef yer hez any more, pickle 'em down till yer meets ther boss. He kin talk ez much ez he's a mind ter; but it ain't safe fur us ter let our tongues woggle too free. He 'specks every man ter do his dooty, an' thim ez don't he lets lead thro', an' gits a new man. Hope yer onderstands."

The hint was intelligible enough. It gave Viola to understand that their lives depended on the faithful performance of their duty; and that it was no use for her to question further, as they had told all they were authorized to.

Gadley's Gang! Then, these were the men from whom she had escaped through the wit and courage of Merry May. Doubtless they had followed her into Brace Box, and captured her for the sake of the ransom they were certain she could pay.

But where was Neville? What share had he in the outrage?

She had almost forgotten him until this question came to her like a flash.

Then came the answer. Neville North had nothing to do with the matter. And Cyril North a great deal. Once more she had been deceived either by the thoroughness of a disguise or through the extraordinary resemblance of the two men.

"And in that case Cyril and Captain Gadley of the road-agents are probably one and the same. After what I have said, I may know what to expect. It will be a relief to see him, and know the worst. He may think that my little story comes too late."

If his identity with the well known outlaw could ever be suspected, it was not very likely that Cyril would be willing to put himself where hanging was the natural corollary.

Though Viola expected to see him every minute, the well-known outlaw delayed his coming. Her ride lasted for hours. Though her cavaliers were respectful, they were silent and vigilant. It was about morning when a permanent halt was made, and she was permitted to seek the rest for which she was almost dying.

Before she had fairly closed her eyes she was fast asleep, forgetful of her troubles; nor did she awaken until Captain Gadley stood in her presence.

She knew him by instinct, and coolly stared him in the face, trying to trace the resemblance she expected to see.

He gave a short laugh, such as she had heard over and over again in the past, but uttered no word of greeting in response to his inquiring gaze, until her eyes fell.

"You're not sure, but you suspect that this time you have found the Simon-pure article. Under the circumstances it is hard to see how you can be deceived. You would hardly take me for the gentle Neville in the midst of such surroundings."

"Who are you, sir? What is the meaning of this outrage?"

She was, if anything, cooler than when she returned to consciousness in the arms of the ruffian, and there was no spark of recognition in her eyes.

"That all just depends on who is asking the questions. Doubtless you have heard of a certain desperado named Captain Gadley. Mr. Gadley and myself are one and the same. If that gentleman ever had any other object in this life save money I never was aware of the fact; and you can understand that we have been pretty intimate acquaintances during the time he has been collecting the taxes."

"I have no doubt that you are as great a ruffian, as huge a rascal as you represent yourself to be, but you have made the mistake of your life if you think you will make a dollar from me beyond those of which you have already plundered me."

"Excuse me. One moment, please. Of course, in collecting the percentages from the average passengers in the hearse, I have to look after the odd change; but with my especial guests it is an entirely different thing. I hope you don't imagine that I am one of the kind that steals the coppers from a defunct Ethiopian's eyelids, or absconds to Canada with the embezzled proceeds of a peanut-stand? If I find that after all my effort at liberal education any of my men have been guilty of such ten-cent nonsense I shall apply the rod of correction after a fashion they will certainly despise. Examine your pockets and give an account of missing stock."

He spoke with a sternness that showed he intended to be obeyed. Uncertain what further he meant Viola turned her pocket inside out.

"I had a purse once upon a time, with about a hundred dollars in it, that I always carried then. I see nothing of it now, and of course the supposition is that your treasury is that much the richer."

"Ah, suppositions don't always go. We'll investigate."

He put a whistle to his lips, and blew a low, trilling blast. In answer a young man made his appearance.

"Investigate Numbers Six and Eight. This young lady claims that they have relieved her of her purse and a hundred dollars. If that is the fact, hang them. I gave them due caution."

"Certainly, sir."

The young man, who had rather a handsome face, and an air about him that showed he was in authority, touched his hat as he spoke, and without further question departed. If Captain Gadley was in earnest, and his orders were obeyed, Viola had perhaps started an unpleasant investigation for the gentlemen known as Six and Eight.

"Discipline must be maintained," continued the captain, again turning toward Viola, "if it breaks up the Gang. I hope that you have been mistaken; if you are correct, I will have you view the result."

Miss North shuddered slightly as she listened. She was certain that she had only told the truth, but it was terrible to think she might have doomed two men to death without advancing her own interests a particle.

"Now, we'll return to our mutton, as they sometimes say, putting the words into very bad French."

"Of course you recognize me—your affectionate cousin, Cyril North. For some time I have been aware of the fact that you were searching for me. From what I have picked up, there have been some new developments concerning our aunt's will, and the bulk of her fortune comes to me—as it should. You know as well I do that I had nothing to do with that miserable affair at the bank."

She refused to answer the question by word or sign. After a slight pause he smiled and went on:

"As I read the papers I am aware that the cloud has lifted, the really guilty parties rising with it. Since then there has been a feverish industry about the efforts you have been making to secure justice for the unfortunate Cyril, that has been a puzzle. I know the immense singleness of purpose of which you are capable; but to be so entirely anxious to thrust half a million or so into the hands of a man whom you once professed to hate so bitterly is more than I can entirely understand. What is your little game?"

"If you were Cyril North a thousand times over I would refuse to treat with you when you approach me in such guise. He has refused to meet me openly; and every time he has come in disguise or by stealth he has made an effort to strike a deadly blow. So long as I am here you may rest very certain that I will not have a word to say in regard to the business on which Neville and I wish to meet him."

"Very positively said, my sweet cousin. Now, you hear me. While my business here is fairly remunerative, I will not deny that I desire a change. As I understand it, the Ruggles fortune is mine for the claiming. At the same time I am haunted by a miserable suspicion that you might some day declare I was not

Cyril North, but an impostor whose right name was Captain Gadley. That would be awkward, and I prefer to take measures rendering this unlikely. Neville is an unmitigated fool; but you are a woman of sense. He deserves, and will get nothing. You deserve all you can lay your hands on. For these reasons, and others not necessary to mention, I propose to make you Mrs. North before we leave this retreat. After that, you and I against the world. We can take care of ourselves."

CHAPTER XVII.

OREGON'S LONE HAND.

"By ther rollin' wheels!" exclaimed Oregon, as his eyes fell on the unfortunate Chestnut.

"They've got ther dead medicine on us this time, and don't yer furgit it. Cleaned Chink out right under our noses, an' sloped with ther spoils, we not seein' 'em. Why didn't yer shout er shoot, young man? We war all thar, jest waitin' fur an' invite ter come in. They got yer stamps, in ccourse?"

Sam Ryan had meantime been hunting for the candle, and found it on the floor. When he had lit it Oregon quickly and quietly cut the cords, Chestnut popping up like a jumping-jack, as they fell away.

"Go fur 'em, quick!" he shouted, swinging himself wildly around as his eyes shot to this side and that, to make sure that the robbers had made good their escape.

"They can't hev got fur. An' they've got too heavy a load ter run fast. All my pile, every durned red cent, an' me a-starvin'! Oh, ther precious rascals! I'll hev ther law on 'em, er you'll think it's a 'bull army, what's shootin' my guns off."

"Oh, don't git excited," said Oregon, as he quietly seized Chestnut by the shoulder and stopped him as he was about rushing out.

"Who did ther trick, and when? It don't seem more than a minute ago that I was looking in through yonder window, an' seen everything lovely, an' you a-countin' ther cash."

"Ef you'd only stayed! That's whar they went out—a good round dozen ov 'em ther' war. Yer must hev heard ther stampin' and ther shootin'. Why ner blazes didn't yer come sooner? It war too orful fur any one tell I got wored down."

"It was exciting, Chestnut Chink," remarked the Sport with a Scar, quite gravely. "We were actually afraid ter come in. But if yer don't sail a leetle nearder to ther truth, we'll hev ter wade in ourselves. I'm yer solid friend, Chestnut, so you tell me jest who it war, an' how he worked ther racket. It's bizziness I'm after, now, an' not fun."

"Wot's ther use ov tellin' ther truth. I don't know nothin'. I war settin' thar countin' ther coin; an' ther next thing I knowed I didn't know nothin'. Ther lights went out, an' I war dead ez a mackarel."

"And you didn't see or recognize the [party that stripped you?"

Merry May was listening with interest, and threw in her question at a venture.

"Thunder, no! They war too thick ter see 'em. But I'll find 'em, an' I'll be even with 'em, er lose a leg. Don't be goin'. Gracious! Would yer leave me hyer, all alone?"

"There are some things more important than others, and I don't think we can afford to waste time listenin' to your lamentations," replied Merry May, sharply.

"We'll give you a chance, however, to get as even as you could or should desire. Put us in sight of the men who have robbed you, and if we can't get your money back from them I will undertake to make good your losses. I'm not making you the offer twice, either. Rustle 'round! If you get on the trail come to Jimmy Bower's for us. You'll find us all there, and we'll run it down for you if you can't make the rifle. Of course it's all one point for you and half a dozen for us; but that's none of your business. Good-night; and the next time you hit it so big don't let the Gang get away with your luggage."

Chestnut began to return thanks. If they had remained to hear, his tongue, now that the steam was up, would probably have kept running all night. He seemed to have a good deal to explain, considerable more to express, and to have no lack of words to do justice to the occasion. It was observable, also, that he never laughed once.

Merry May shut off all this. She simply strode away, making an almost imperceptible gesture to her companions, who followed her without a word.

She was evidently thinking hard, as they went along; and Oregon, who was furtively watching her, could have sworn that she managed to watch the door of Chestnut's dug-out, though she never once turned her head, until it was fairly beyond sight. Then she halted, and held up her hand.

"There you have it; and who would have thought it? We've lost sight of the balance, but the Fates have left us Chestnut; and, if I'm not 'way off, he's the hub of the whole affair."

"How do yer make that out?" queried Ryan, a little puzzled.

"Ther blamed leetle gerloot seems ter hev

more in him than ther boys hev bin thinkin'; but he ain't goin' ter find *that* Gang. It'll take a man ter do that."

"Bless your innocent soul, he's the gang himself."

Oregon gave a whistle—more of surprise than dissent. He had all along been giving Chink credit a trifle further than he had yet gone, and he did not understand what the girl gambler had seen to give her such an idea.

"I wonder you didn't see it, Oregon. Chestnut is in disguise, and all that fol-de-rol was just put on. There's a deep game going on somewhere, and we haven't been thrown off the trail quite so badly as we thought. You traced that young man to the dug-out, and thought that he got away from you then. Bet you a dollar he didn't, and it's lucky you didn't say anything about him. He just shed his feathers and rigged himself over again while you were watching at the door. Hey, presto! Chestnut Chink comes in his place. Freeze onto him then, trail him down when he leaves the but. Ten to one you'll strike oil. Keep mighty dark, and don't let him throw you off. Sam and I will go back to Jimmy's and take a fresh start; but you'll either find us there, or they can give you an idea where to look if you happen to have anything to report."

"But whar d' yer think he'll go to ef he skips ther dug-out?"

"If he gets away from you, and you can't see anything better to do, make a break for Paul Morrison's cabin, up the gulch. When you get there go slow. We're not done with the madam, by a long sight. And, by the way, she's got a particular interest in you, unless I'm away off. Look out for her teeth. She can bite hard."

"Who's ther madam! Blamed ef you ain't picked up more pints in half a dozen hours than I hev in a week. An' I bin keepin' my eyes open."

So far Oregon had not received more than a hint of Merry May's adventures, and of course did not understand her allusion to Paul Morrison, and the gulch. Now, she hesitated just a moment, remembering what Mrs. Morrison had told her in regard to Cyril North's list of friends. She could not have told them nor could she tell now, why it was; but she believed that the woman was speaking for a purpose. An idea suggested itself.

Without answering Oregon's question she turned to Sam Ryan.

"See here, pard. Suppose some one would hire a man to follow Colonel Rollins around Base Dix, and take a peculiar interest in his affairs; what do you think would happen to this innocent individual?"

"Kid r generally shoots when he has anything ter say that he don't want disremembered. I should say he'd kill him."

"Charles Colcard is tarred with the same stick, ain't he?"

"You bet."

"And yourself, Sam? What would you be apt to do?"

"I'm apt ter bit—an' bit hard. I wouldn't like to sw'ar I wouldn't break his neck."

"That's about the way I look at it; and I guess the madam has the same idea. The madam, Oregon, is supposed to be Paul Morrison's wife. She's a handsome woman, pard, a monstrous handsome woman; and she don't mean to live all her life up the gulch. If she's not taking a hand in fer this half milliou pool I'm wide off my base, that's all."

"And she's got an interest in me?"

"She has that, if my eyes are worth as much as I think. Perhaps she's afraid of you—think you hold too big a hand fer her in ther game that is being played."

"A ban'um woman, askin' about Oregon! That's kinder queer, that. But Oregon's byar, an' kin speak fur himself. Thankee, I'll act accordin'."

He turned back as he spoke, leaving Merry May and Solid Sam to find the way to the hotel. They were barely out of sight of the dug-out, so that, before he had gone far, he began to use caution. If Merry May was not mistaken—and she was one whose opinion was never very far wrong in matters that concerned craft and eyesight—he needed to look well to his going. Chestnut might be looking out for him.

In less than five minutes Oregon felt satisfied of the correctness of the girl gambler's guess. He took up a convenient position and watched the shanty closely. By the moving of a shadow he knew that there was some one within.

Patience was not one of Oregon's cardinal virtues, and before long he was debating whether it would not be the cheapest plan to twist Chink's neck until he told the whole truth. Perhaps he would have eventually determined on trying that, but just as he was deciding in his mind that some such plan was feasible, the door opened, and some one stepped out.

After that the man with a scar had no doubts as to his course. This was not Chestnut's garb, and it was the young man originally trailed to the spot; yet, as he fastened the door with a padlock, and gave a proprietary glance around before leaving, it was not hard to believe that Merry May had hit it about right.

"He's nerve by ther bushel," muttered Oregon.

"After a game like that, to give hisself away makes a feller look a leetle out. Mebbe he's riskin' a heap—he can't be prezactly a fool—on the chance ter win big money back. Look out, sport, thar's a trap somewhar."

The work of following only looked a little too easy. Cyril, or whoever he was, moved with a careless swing, the very reverse of Chestnut Chink's shambling gait, and did not appear to have a care in the world.

The hour was rather late. Though here and there a glimmer of light shone from some window, for the most part Brace Box was wrapped in darkness, and the streets seemed utterly deserted. For a stranger to pass through the camp was not a particularly dangerous thing, though there was a chance of meeting some of the night-birds, that were sometimes felt rather than seen, and who, at this hour, were doubly to be feared.

If Oregon knew little concerning Paul Morrison and his wife, beyond the warning that Chestnut Chink had given him, and the brief explanation of Merry May's visit, he knew where the gulch was, and he fancied that his quarry was aiming in that direction.

It puzzled him, too. If this was Chestnut Chink, or Chestnut's friend, why had that much underrated individual directed his attention that way? By this time they must know that he was identified with the interests of the Norths, whose foes they seemed to be.

Perhaps there might be some mistake about that; whether they were or not, he proposed to find out in some way or other.

While he was revolving these things in his mind, but all the time keeping a keen eye on the shadow in front, he saw the young man halt suddenly and throw up his hands, while from the ground around him rose up three or four other shadows, that sprung at him with a snarling curse.

At the sight Oregon rushed forward.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AND OREGON IS LEFT.

THIS attack did not belong to Oregon's circus; but for any one that knew the sport, it was a sure thing that he would have a hand in the show before it was over. He never saw two at one without trying to make it even; and if three were at one, he tried all the harder.

The distance that separated them was not great; the young man sprang lightly to this side, to that, and backward. When Oregon arrived on the scene, no great harm had yet been done.

An instant later, the young fellow struck straight from the shoulder, one of the men falling down as though he had been shot.

It was very neatly and very quickly done, but it took time and attention. He did not seem to notice that one of his assailants had flung himself to one side, out of reach and range, but he boldly followed up the other two, who were shifting in just the opposite direction. This gave the strategic villain his chance. He sprang in from behind, caught the young man by hip and shoulder, and flung him high up in the air.

It was almost the same game that had been played on Merry May, but Oregon never thought of that. He dashed in to the rescue of his own quarry, which he managed to snatch or catch and place safely on the ground, and yet he in time to meet the attack of the bludgeoners, who, silently and viciously, at once closed in.

There were four rough men against one, for Oregon did not count on any one but himself. If the young man ran away he would not be much disappointed, since he rather preferred to play a lone game. If he managed to get in a couple blows first he would make things seem more even. If he did not, and the shooting began, it would be all the better not to have his aim distracted by unnecessary objects. Until some one made a movement to produce a pistol Oregon preferred to leave his own weapons in place. A stranger in a strange town wants to be a little careful how he shoots, even at such ruffians as these.

And he would, just as soon as not, have seen them slink away. Indeed, he half expected they would when they saw that there was a real, live man in the way.

"Hold hard, thar!" he shouted.

"I'm real old rough and ready when you crowd me; but soft ez silk ef yer treats me white. Jest take yerselves afore ye'r hurt, an' you'll feel a heap better in ther mornin'. Easy, now; er sing out fer ther coryner. An' yer better call him now!"

He changed his tone with startling suddenness when the three came at him in savage silence. He would sooner have had a shooting frolic and be done with it, since it would have given him a chance to use his own weapons at an earlier stage of the game than he otherwise cared to produce them. The luck of the night could not last forever, and sooner or later he would have to fall back on his irons.

Nevertheless, the time that followed was extremely lively. Stop and parry, hit and jab—for a few moments the five were mixed together in a row that was fierce enough for a dozen,

and Oregon found that the contract was heavier than he could carry. These men did not mind a hard crack or two, and there was no chance to knock any of them out. In addition, while he was enjoying the fracas the young man would slip away, and be lost.

If the latter had taken a hand in he might have evened up matters amazingly; but he only folded his arms, and standing far enough away to be out of the game, watched it with evident interest.

A side glance showed this to Oregon, and it angered him. He hit out as hard as he knew how, and chance had given him a fair mark. The man he struck tumbled endways, and the Sport with a Scar sprung out of the rout. It looked as though he was going to run away.

Of that, however, he had no idea. As he bounded off he drew his revolvers; and before the toughs understood what he was up to he was half a dozen paces away, his hands out, and holding the cocked pistols very straight.

"Han's up, thar, you! I ain't keerin' ter lay out corpses, but, by ther rollin' wheels! ther'll be a stack ov 'em ef yer crowds me now. I've got ther drop, an' I'm jest about ready ter use it!"

Somehow, to-night, bluff did not work worth a cent. The men just listened to what he said, and then moved on, as though they cared no more for his sixes than if they had been pop-guns.

At that, Oregon, with right hand and left, began to pull trigger as fast as his thumbs could lift the hammers. Before the villains had passed over half the distance separating them, they should have all been dead men.

Yet not a man dropped.

Click, click, dropped the hammers, but no reports followed.

"Doctored! by ther jumpin' jimcrank!" exclaimed Oregon, as each cylinder completed its full revolution; and he realized that there was more in this than he had dreamed of.

With fierce energy he hurled the otherwise useless weapons, each one striking a man full in the face, and felling him with the certainty of a poleax.

"Yer head 'll feel wuss than ef I'd hed ball an' powder fur ter hev creased yer. Would yer? I guess not. Down in front, thar. Now I give it away, an' now you've got it sure."

The heavy revolvers landing just where he wanted them, did splendid execution, and at the same time completely demoralized the enemy, so that he had no difficulty in planting two more blows that seemed to make complete victory certain.

Just as he was standing with his right drawn back, ready for a heavy blow, the young man, who seemingly had been the cause of all this hard fighting, threw up his own hand, and aiming his revolver, which had not before made its appearance, fired one shot.

There could be no mistake about his aim or intention.

Oregon was too near to be mistaken for any one else, and though it was a snap-shot that was made without an instant to linger on the aim, Oregon fell.

"Now, then, you infernal botches, bear a hand!" the young man shouted, as he thrust away the smoking pistol.

"You can't begin to shoot, even at this hour of the night, without having some one on hand to see the fun. Catch hold, and get him out of the way."

"Ef he's a stiff, what's ther use ter tote him 'round? Let Brace Box berry him, an' we'll git under kiver."

"Dead? Not for money. If I thought he was I'd turn loose on you. Four to one; and he'd have killed you all with his bare hands if I hadn't chipped just in time!"

"Ef you hedn't barred out ther tools, I reckon you wouldn't 'a' hed to chipped."

"And if I hadn't had his tools fixed before-hand, where would you have been now? No more wind, or I may take a fancy to go on with his work where he stopped. Clap a stopper on his mouth and a hitch around his wrists, or he'll be up and at you before you get ready to begin."

None of the five seemed in an amiable humor, but the young man had his ruffians well in hand, and after the exhibition they had of Oregon's prowess, their respect for the Sport with a Scar was sufficiently great for them to take the advice without delay.

They gagged him, bound him, and then, hastily fastening a handkerchief around his head, more to prevent a possible drop of blood here and there from marking a trail than for any interest they had in his welfare, they carried him away, while the young man who had led Oregon into so dangerous an ambuscade, pursued his way alone.

His steps led through the town and then to the cabin of Paul Morrison, that lay up the gulch.

CHAPTER XIX.

JUDGE LYNCH BEGINS TO WHISPER.

IT took some little time for Neville North to shake off the cloud of jealous gloom under which Merry May had left him resting.

When he did he made things extremely lively for a little, wakening Jimmy Bower out of a sound slumber with an energy that made the landlord think there was an earthquake, or the house was coming down.

It took a little time for Bower to understand what was wrong, or why any one should come to him for help.

"Bless yer soul, young man!" said Jimmy, and he flourished a navy six as he spoke.

"Ain't you a leetle off? D'yer think I go 'round an' tuck in ther bedclothes fur my lady boarders? Missin', are she? Ef so, an' you can't tell whar she be, whar d'yer s'pose I kin in at? I reckon you're all right, an' I wouldn't like ter say anything ter set ther Gang ag'in' yer; but ef that young lady can't be found, an' thar's money in ther case, it mout leave you in a thumpin' bad fix. You war ther last livin' person ez seen her so fur ez I know, an' ther fu'st question ther boys'll ask are, 'Whar did yer leave her?'"

Jimmy was not a bit alarmed, and he put his question in such a deadly earnest way that Neville saw there was something in it, though beyond his understanding for the present.

"I, leave her? What is it you mean to insinuate, old man? I'll swear that I haven't seen her since I left her, early in the evening, to racket around town by myself. I'd have known nothing of it had it not been for that young lady who arrived here in the same stage, and who patched up an acquaintance on the road. She came to me to tell that Viola was missing."

"An' ef you didn't ax me, an hour or so, ago, ter send her to ther dinin'-room ter hear suthin' 'portant, I'm a bald-headed Dutchman."

"Ah, that is something at last," began Neville.

"I'll take my oath that I did not—that I was peacefully sleeping the sleep of a righteous innocent an hour ago, and two hours ago. It's the other man; the fellow that looks like me. Come, you are wasting valuable time. What did that man want? Who was this fellow? It is the second time that he has been in the house this night, trying to take my place. Describe him to me so that I may know him."

"Looks like you, eh? I sh'd smile. Jest you peek into ther lookin'-glass, an' you'll see ther identickie, owdashus cuss. Now, I'm remarkin'."

Mr. Bower was not only a believer in his opinion but he intended to remain so. Thus far Neville had only succeeded in directing suspicion against himself—and precious time was flying.

"As I have not been in the dining-room since supper, nor have I seen my cousin, it was not I, however much you may think so. I tell you, it must have been the man we are looking for, Cyril North. If you do not believe me there is the letter left behind that shows what has been done. What I must know next is, how he did it. If she went to visit him of her own accord, I swear that I'll never move a step. If she was carried off, against her will, I swear I will never know rest or sleep until I get the thing straightened."

He placed Cyril's letter in the hand of the landlord, and waited with surprising calmness while it was slowly perused.

"Harrowin' up yer holiest 'fections purty bad, ain't it?" said Jimmy, at length, deliberately handing back the letter, and looking at Neville with something very like a twinkle in his eyes.

"I don't keer ter rise yer angry pashuns, an' I tell yer fair an' squar' that I know better; but ef I war you I'd put that away somewhar, an' say nothin' more 'bout it. Ef some one war comparin' it with yer writin' in ther register ov this hyer house, he might take a noshun that ther feller writes like you, too."

Bower had a revolver convenient, and was in his own house, so that he risked little in making this insinuation; but Neville glared at him in speechless indignation, until he had fairly mastered its meaning.

"Why, confound you! You don't think I wrote it, do you?"

"In course I don't; but ther's plenty es would. Ef ther young lady's missin', I'd advise yer ter find her—an' mighty soon, too. Brace Box are a-lookin' at you, an' she ain't takin' too much stock in these hyer myst'ries. Ef ther young woman hes a half-million at her finger-ends, you might think this a good place ter drop her out ov sight, ef you're ther next ov kin. Nobody ain't seen this feller that looks like you, an' ef yer can't projuce her, ther next best thing might be ter interdoose him, so we kin see yer both tergether. You sabbe?"

"Yes. I understand the vile hint, though least of all should it have come from you, since you, at least, have seen Cyril North, and not so long ago as to have forgotten his appearance."

"True ez preechin', an' ez I only seen one at a time, I can't tell yer apart. An' now, ef ther's anything in this, drop chinnin', an' git down ter biz. You bin a-wastin' time by ther bucketful, an' she gittin' funder away all ther while. We'll look 'round ther house, an' see ef thar's no sign w'ich way she went. I wouldn't be skeered ef we found her back in her room ag'in'."

"I would," retorted Cyril, sharply, but he

followed Jimmy, who first of all led the way toward the dining-room.

"Kinder cur'us, this," said Bower, snatching at a little packet that lay on the end of the table, with a sudden dive.

"Thort I seen yer lay it out, an' figgered that thar war suthin' in it ez you wanted ter talk to her about. Mebbe you kin tell ef it's yours, er ef it only b'longs to ther feller that looks like you."

It seemed to Jimmy worth remembering that Neville clapped his hand to his breast at sight of the package, which appeared to consist of old letters, and other documents.

"It can't be mine—unless I dropped it when I was at the supper table and some one has since found it and placed it there. I have not been near the spot before since I first entered the house."

"In course not. Don't we know? Thar's Johnny, now, comin' ter see wha's ther matter. He could swar ter that; an' so could the rest of ther crowd. I see your name hyer pritty frequent; but mebbe that's ther same ez ther one ov ther feller that looks like you. It's a nasty mix, anyhow. Blame me ef I'd keer ter live ef I hed ter drag 'round a shadder like that! Let's finish up hyer an' then go round to her room. Ef she's run away you bet she ain't left her jewelry behind."

Johnny was about half-dressed, and blinking like an owl. It was a wonder that he had been sufficiently roused to turn out. Somehow, though, he got an idea that something not altogether according to the schedule was going on, and he wanted to be posted. In the same way a couple more men sauntered in, though obviously a little ashamed of themselves when they saw only the landlord, showing a guest around with a light.

"Glad ter see yer, gents, an' thet yer hev'n't furgot yer shooters. This gent says he's lost suthin', an' were lookin' fur it hard. Mebbe yer wouldn't mind goin' out by way of the winders, an' see ef you kin strike a trail."

"What's missing, Jimmy? Give us the name and we'll see if we can't show the article."

The young fellow who spoke looked hard at North. There was something in Jimmy's manner that made him suspicious.

"Ther article are a young lady ez arrived on ther stage, an' ain't hardly hed time ter make herself at home. She may hev bin kerried off; er she may only hev lost her way. Ef thar war any place ter hide her I'd say, look out fur a corpus. Keep yer eyes open anyhow fur blood."

The excitement increased, and several more were added to the corps of searchers. Outside and in they went, but found nothing. The man who abducted Viola was too shrewd to leave any footprints.

Bower attached himself to Neville North, and from a talkative mortal turned into a taciturn. His revolver was at a ready all the time, and Neville realized at last that he himself was but little better than a prisoner. He had reached for the package of letters when he had so far recovered from his surprise as to recognize them, and at the movement Jimmy had quietly put them in his pocket.

The search of the dining-room and its surroundings having revealed nothing, an adjournment was made, first to Viola's room, and then to that of Neville.

The young man explained where he found Cyril's letter, his words being received with ominous silence; and pointed out his bed, which barely showed the impress of his form. He might have been sleeping in it for an hour or so, but as far as appearances went it was just as likely that he had only thrown himself on it and tumbled the bed-clothes.

"It's a queer kinder start," said Jimmy, the last vestige of a smile fading out of his fat face as he laid his hand on Neville's shoulder.

"I don't want yer ter think hard ov us, but I guess you hedn't better exert yerself much tell this myst'ry are cleared up. I'll git ther town out an' see what we kin find. Ef we don't find nothin' you kin hev a chance ter talk with Kunnel Rollins in ther mornin'. He's our alcade hyer, yer know—kinder regurlates things with his pistols, yer orderstands; an' what he says most frequent goes."

All this had not really taken so much time; and Bower certainly had the right to satisfy himself that Neville's story had something in it before he gave an alarm that would do him and his house more or less damage.

Neville was satisfied with that part; the words of Jimmy indicated something else, neither flattering nor agreeable. If they meant anything, it was that he was under arrest, and that he would have an opportunity in the morning for proving himself innocent of the murder of his cousin.

The young man was not altogether an idiot, and he understood that such a charge made against a stranger by a responsible citizen was not a thing to be laughed at. Men had been lynched on no more obvious proof in about half the time Jimmy Bower had taken to form his opinion. If the worthy landlord so willed it, something of the kind might happen now.

As for resistance—that was not to be thought of. He was perfectly unarmed, while the land-

lord had his pistol ready, and would no doubt use it on the first provocation. Even if he broke away there was no place he could escape to; and he wisely decided that the more coolly he took the charge the easier it would be to disabuse the minds of everybody of the unpleasant suspicion. He could not altogether smooth the anger out of his voice, but he spoke far more steadily than he had hoped for.

"I suppose I understand your meaning, and I won't tell you how big a fool I think you. In your western parlance you have the drop, and the only thing I can do is to hold up my hands, and let you go on to find out how great an ass you are making of yourself. At the same time—believing in your honesty—I must have your word as a man that nothing will be left undone to discover what has become of my unfortunate cousin. Give it, and swear to it, or I'll run the risks, and show Brace Box what answer should be given to such a foul charge."

"Ke-rect. I'll leave you in ther hands ov Johnny an' one ov ther boys, an' say nothin' funder tell we've looked round. Git a crowd hyer, an' somebody say rope once—howlin' hyeners! you'd go up ther flume a-kinin'!"

There was more truth than poetry in this. For fear that some one would say rope, Neville followed to the office without further objection. At the door they came face to face with Sam Ryan and Merry May, who had just arrived.

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE BRINK OF BLINDMAN'S SHAFT.

MERRY MAY and her escort reached the hotel without further adventure, though they saw that Brace Box had begun to experience an excitement that was rising and spreading.

There was already a drift of men toward Jimmy's, and more than once May heard them speaking of a missing girl.

"Master Neville has come to his senses, and started an inquiry," she muttered. "Perhaps that is what I should have done, but I thought I could strike the trail before it would be covered."

"Wish I'd bin on ther ground afore they over-run it hyer," replied Sam. "We'll see in a holy minrit what they've found out."

So it happened that they entered just when Neville North was being escorted into the office as a prisoner.

To a person of tolerably quick mind there was no difficulty in the world in taking in the situation. Neville carried it off pretty well, but there was a certain suggestion of a hang-dog look about him, only to be seen under such circumstances; while, in spite of Jimmy's care, the guards proclaimed themselves in a dozen silent ways.

Ryan gave Merry May a warning look before he spoke.

"Hello, Bower, what are up now?"

"Don't mind tellin' you, Sam, ef it don't go funder. I must look out fur ther name ov ther old castle. Mebbe I'm all wrong, but I've hed ter set down on our young friend hard, till he proves hisself ther pure white quill. Ef he looked more like a fool I'd put him down fur an honest man. Ez it are, I'm holdin' him safe tell the young lady turns up, er we know whar she went to."

"But you don't 'spect him ov kerryin' her off? W'y, bless yer soul! she came hyar to meet him. An' you heard 'bout the racket he war in last night? Well, you bet ther same Gang ez war after him thar bez snaked his cousin off now. Come, Jimmy, ye'll pitchin' it a leetle too stiff ter swaller. Let up on it. He's my pard, an' I'll go bail fer him. Turn him loose ter j'ine in ther search."

"Sorry I can't Sam—monstrous sorry. Wouldn't hurt him fur a dollar; but, fact are, I've got ter keep him in case ther jedge wants a look over."

"Ther jedge! What jedge?"

"Jedge Lynch, ov course. Killer 'll hev ter git up a court. We ain't prezactly angels at Brace Box, but we can't let a outrage like this go by; an' Mr. North hadn't orter want it. He'll get justice one way er t'other, an' that orter be good ernuf."

"Yes, ef it don't come after his funeral," answered Sam, dryly, as he held out his hand to Neville, who, as yet, had said nothing.

"Take her easy, pard. Thar's more sense in what Jimmy's doin' than he knows of. You'll be safe as a church tell I get the bank straight, an' you wouldn't be much good nohow. Lanty an' his pard 'll be along soon as they hear ther news, an' I'll put them on ther watch. With you fur a bait they may catch a whale, ef the party as got Miss North comes back for the rest of the family. Keep your courage up while I look a bit further. So long. I'll see you later."

Merry May had not waited to listen to this brief conversation, but had passed on to what did duty for waiting-room and parlor. There Sam joined her.

He seemed puzzled and troubled.

"Blame me ef I wouldn't like ter know ef Jimmy's squar' er not. He may hev took things ez they come, an' put 'em together, or it may be all a game. Either way er both ways, ef they talk rope ter-night, an' Killer an' those go in

with a rush, I wouldn't want him in a worse box, nohow."

"It might come to that if he was here alone," said May, thoughtfully.

"But perhaps Oregon will give them enough to do at home. As you have been backing the outsiders, I would advise you to look out for yourself. Perhaps they can't raise the town on you, but they might play some ugly trick to get you out of the way for a while."

For answer Ryan smiled and stretched his brawny shoulders significantly. Merry May continued.

"Yes, I know; but I've seen good men in a box before now. Don't be too brash. You can stand the work, so I suppose you will spend the rest of the night looking after the lost Viola. I confess I am about played. I'm going for rest now. If anything turns up, or if Oregon comes in with anything specially interesting, call me up. Otherwise—well, I'll shoot the first individual that comes racketing around for the fun of the thing. I'm too dead tired to see."

It was no great wonder. The ride of the day, and the unusual exercise, with its attendant excitements, of the night, were enough to weary a stronger man. She did not believe that Neville was in any immediate danger, and she was certain that she could not do Viola any good that would not be accomplished by the others that were on the search. Besides, the Norths were only casual acquaintances, after all. She was interested in them, and the mystery that surrounded them, but her interest did not speak louder than her fatigue. She went to her room; was asleep in five minutes; and did not open her eyes again, so far as she remembered, until the next day about noon.

The little that Sam Ryan had seen of her had given him considerable respect for Merry May—not as a woman, but as a gritty little pard to tie to. Nevertheless, he felt rather a relief when she retired from the scene. He had said a good deal less than he might have done in regard to the outlook. Quick of apprehension, and wise as to the temper of the men of Brace Box, he had taken in the situation at a glance. He knew that Jimmy never would have dared to act as he had done without some ostensible evidence; and if a crowd got fairly interested in Viola's fate it would not require much testimony from the landlord to send it raving after Cyril. In that case, to save him would be neither child's play, nor work for a woman.

Merry May had put him in possession of the bare facts as she knew them, and now he quietly went to work, gathering up the additional particulars as they had developed.

There was not much more to be learned, except in regard to the mysterious interview in the dining-room. He understood that, in the light of what the young lady gambler had told him; but as he had no evidence at hand to point out the truth he said nothing. It did not seem to be time yet to mention this other cousin, who had been playing such a reckless game. Better to wait for developments.

He could advise nothing that was not already being done. A search was being made all around the hotel, and every man that joined in, or was met, received a thorough questioning.

So far no one had been found who had seen or heard anything suspicious. If Viola was dead, where was the corpse? If she had been captured or carried away, where had she been taken to? How was it that no one had met her abductors, or could offer a reasonable suggestion as to the way she had gone?

"It's no use," said Jimmy, with an air of disgust, as a man came in and reported no progress.

"Ef we can't, we can't. When ther nose on yer face don't throw a shadder, how kin yer expect ter find her afore daylight comes? I'd advise yer all ter make up yer minds ter not seein' anything ter-night, though it won't hurt nothin' ter be lookin' fur her. But to-morrow we'll find out suthin' about it, er bu'st a wheel. You can't kerry a wagon-load ov calico outen town 'thout some one seein' ov her; an' ef we once get onto this end ov ther string, we won't stop until we git to ther other. An' it mout be thet she's sneaked off ov her own notion, or gone with another man. A feller don't know whether she'd thank him fur too much racket, or ef she's too dead ter keer."

It was this shade of doubt that prevented closer inquiry in regard to Neville, and kept the excitement from rising to fever heat. The night passed, morning came, and as yet there had been no new developments.

The first man that brought in any intelligence that amounted to anything was Happy Saul, who came wandering along in search of his morning bitters, and was, up to that time, perfectly oblivious of what had happened, or was supposed to have happened the night before.

When he heard about the disappearance, he had a little story to tell directly.

Saul lived in a shanty in the outskirts, and after the little riot in front of Hank's Hole in the Ground, he had gone home and gone to bed, falling asleep almost immediately.

He had no idea whatever how long he slept, but he was awakened by the report of a pistol somewhere in the neighborhood. Having Bull Dog

Ben on his mind, the sound wakened him, though he was generally a sound sleeper.

After lying silent for some time, and hearing nothing further, he got up and looked out of the door.

On looking carefully around he saw one man, at no great distance, going in the direction of the center of the town, while three or four others, a good deal further off, were going in the opposite way. Their course would take them direct to Blindman's Shaft, and between them they carried something that seemed to be heavy enough to make quite a load.

The fight was over, and there was little chance of its renewal, so that Saul returned to his bunk, went to sleep again, and by morning had forgotten all about the occurrence until it was recalled to his mind.

"And who war ther chaps, Saul, an' what war they reelly doin'? Did yer spot 'em close ernuf ter speak uv 'em by card? Brace Box are big ernuf ter hev more ner one game goin' on at a time, an' it ain't jest so likely thet them ger-loots hed ary thing ter do with this byer Miss North affair."

"I wouldn't hev thort so," responded Saul, cautiously, "ef it hedn't b'in fur one thing. Mebbe I hedn't ort ter mention that, nuther, until I git a leetle funder eensight to ther game; but truth's ther truth, an' how kin a man be happy ef he's a liar? You hear me, pards?"

"Ov course we kin; git off ther roof! Some 'un'll be thinkin' you know more than yer keer ter tell. When they do, they'll be apt ter organize a court, jest too quick."

"I don't want ter make no mistake," said Saul. "A mistake are wuss ner a lie, fur it'll kerry twicte ez fur, an' scatter like blazes. 'Sides that, when you've only hed a glimpe two ov a man, it ain't allers so easy ter recognize him by nights, an' you half asleep. No, sirs, I wouldn't like ter make a oath to ther fact now; but jest then I'd 'a' swore it war ther young man ez ther queer racket war about at ther Bower 'tother night. He's some sorter relative to ther young lady; an' all 'round, it does 'pear ter me I must hev got 'way off when I made sich a mistake ez that."

There was an ominous mutter, such as Saul did not exactly understand, and then some one suggested:

"What's the matter with looking at Blindman's Shaft, anyhow? You can't find what's in it, but there may be something outside to show who's been there."

Blindman's Shaft was beyond the circle of search already made, and was quite a walk from the center of the town; but every one knew where it was. The brawling waters of Blindman's Creek ran close to it, and it was nearly filled with stagnant, muddy water, in which, in times past, more than one corpse had been found floating, and the presence of a great many more suspected.

If Viola had been murdered, as Jimmy Bower had so strongly hinted to Neville that she had been, it was a good place to leave the body of the victim.

The hint took like wildfire, and without any drumming for recruits a strong posse was formed, that departed post haste, taking Happy Saul along.

The ground was soon covered by the party, and as they stumbled down the gulch at the bottom of which lay the course through which ran Blindman's Creek the excitement grew deeper though more suppressed, so that, as the mouth of the shaft came into the view of the leaders, every one heard Happy Saul as he exclaimed:

"By ther 'ternal Rockies! She's in thar! Took off her shoes an' stockin's—thar they be—ter drown herself; an' hyar's huff-prents on ther brink!"

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL SET.

THE announcement of Happy Saul raised the wildest excitement, although he was telling nothing more than the rest were seeing for themselves. Everybody crowded around the mouth of the shaft, and looked downward at the muddy water below.

Of course nothing was to be seen there, and the thoughtless action of the mass of the explorers rendered it difficult to make any further progress.

Still, by shouting, pushing, and a deal of firm remonstrance, every one else was induced to leave the soft ground, while Happy Saul, and a few of the others examined it thoroughly.

Again a cry escaped Saul's lips.

He had discovered the footprints of a woman.

The ground around the shaft had been pretty well trampled over, and only a couple of them were plain; but right at the edge of the shaft was the clearly defined print.

"I tell you, gentlemen, she's thar," said one of the enthusiasts.

"It's going to be a job, but I guess we can get around to it. For one, I'm dead bent to know if she was living when she went down. If not, why not? Get hooks and ropes, and finish the work. Then we can make it heavy for those that fixed up the job."

The man spoke viciously, but what he said caught the popular fancy.

Within half an hour a dozen men were sounding the shaft.

Though everybody worked long and faithfully it is scarcely necessary to say that they did not find the body of Viola North.

If it had been there to find, it is doubtful if they could have raised it through the twenty feet of black, muddy water, in which they were grubbing, unless they procured much better appliances than those they had.

The shaft was not so deep; but at the bottom of it there was a tunnel, that had been run some hundred feet before the water came in and drowned the miners out so effectually that no one ever attempted to prosecute the work further.

This was remembered by and by, and everybody but Happy Saul was ready to give up the search.

"Jest one minnit, one holy minnit!" he said, holding up his hand as he peered downward.

"You fellers hev bin fishin', an' fishin', an' you ain't kept yer eyes open. Thar, now, what yer callin' that, eh?"

In triumph he drew up a dripping bundle, that, when he had taken it in his hand, examined and straightened, he held up so all could see. Beyond question it was the remains of what once was a stylish-looking hat.

Another thrill went around the crowd, as though all hands were joined and some one was working an electric machine in connection with the circle. No one there could positively recognize it as being the property of Viola North; but if not hers to whom else could it belong?

"Boys, I ain't yearnin' ter see a necktie party," said Saul, as he heard the universal groan that greeted the sight.

"I hed thought thet Brace Box wouldn't bother with such foolishness; but, I war bound ter show ez I war tellin' ther truth. Thar's ther proof. Fer ther balance, you kin do ez you please."

"That's good enough; four aces wouldn't be better. Take the deck, Saul; the trick's yours."

"It's hardly wuth while ter look funder?" Saul knew pretty well the temper of his auditors; but he asked the question with a view to starting things in the way they should go.

"Not ter look fur her—that's dead sure. But I guess we're lookin' out fur ther men ez put her thar. An' when we find 'em you bet they'll wish they could git in thar an' be done with it. Brace Box don't often say much, but when it's time ter git thar she does a heap."

"An' ef Jimmy ain't got one of 'em kerreled now, I don't know a sinner by his looks."

Two men, without any intent to lead the crowd, had said sufficient to start the ball rolling—and there were enough hands collected at Blindman's Shaft to keep it going to a very lively tune. The arrest of Neville North had been quietly managed, and was little known or understood; but in the light of what Happy Saul saw, or declared he saw, and what had been found, everything seemed plain.

"Ef they hev ther boss, bet you a dollar we kin git ther gang!" suggested another.

"I ain't much on regulatin' myself; but lay on ther gad, an' I'll bet yer he gives away his pards in ther racket."

"Well, whooper up ter town, an' ef we know beans, there'll be a necktie party ter-night. Thar's no use spendin' more time hyer!"

As yet, nothing very definite had been proposed. The time for action was not at hand; and the friends of Judge Lynch are none too anxious to discuss beforehand what may be the sentences of his court. But belief is contagious, and there was scarcely a man in the party that did not feel satisfied that Viola had been murdered; and the majority of them held that Neville North had something to do with the crime. If they could have laid hands on him just then, they would hardly have taken time to organize a court.

The walk to town calmed the excitement somewhat; but the march of so many men through the streets could not help but attract a still greater crowd, though the majority of the workers were at their toil, and would be until dark.

"What in the name of all creation is going on now?" thought Merry May, who had just arisen from her prolonged sleep, and who looked out of the window about the time the procession arrived. For the moment she did not think about Viola North.

The answer to her question came along, without any effort on her part.

A few hurried words satisfied the latest arrivals that their intelligence and theory were about the newest on the ground. One of the foremost in the crowd mounted a chair that stood on the porch, and held up his hand.

"Gentlemen!" he said. "Big bugs and little bugs, bugs of all sorts! There's a good many of you, but there's not enough. When we get down to business we want the whole of Brace Box to have a chance to be here. Something happened last night not exactly according to rule, and, if it's as bad as we think, it ought to wind up in a necktie party. The reports are not all in yet, but we've seen enough to be

pretty sure, and I move we call a town meeting for sundown to-night. Jimmy Bower can tell you what it's all about if you don't know; and between now and then we can all keep our eyes open for fresh points. I hope something will turn up to show that we are on the wrong scent, but I'm mighty much afraid there won't. How's the vote? All speak at once, all speak alike, and it will sound louder."

The answer was as unanimous as it was intended to be. Every man that voted said "Ay!"

"Then don't stand around all afternoon talking over the same old stories. Hunt up something fresh, and be on hand at sundown. This meeting stands adjourned."

The crowd did not disperse at once, but it gradually fell away, scattering over the town, some seeking further information, and others discussing the situation at the different saloons in the camp.

"They mean it, sure as you live," thought Merry May, watching the proceedings from a convenient window.

"And the worst of it is they all seem to think the same way. It looks to me as though some one was leading them who knows how to manage the job. I don't see anything of Ryan in the crowd; Oregon don't appear to have turned up, and I'm left alone to back the losing side. Ugh! there's more knocks than coin going in Brace Box. I was a fool to ever come here. I suppose I had better look after something to eat now, and then visit the adorable Neville. I'm the only friend he has, and he's in a heap more danger than he knows of. The wonder is they are not looking after me. I begin to suspect they have Oregon, and my turn may come next."

May was thinking after this style as she listened to the speaker from the porch. He was as roughly-dressed as any one in the mob; but he spoke with an accuracy that showed both education and the habit of talking in public. If he was leading the crowd for a purpose, he was certainly a dangerous man. She determined to find out once who he was.

After all, it was possible that no one had identified her with the Norths. Bower did not seem to when he saw her seated at the dinner-table; and as she was a woman he talked quite freely, though she noticed he gave very little information that was not already public property. It was natural enough to be horrified at the outrage and curious about the perpetrators, but Jimmy offered no explanation of the meaning of the speaker from the porch.

While they were talking, Neville North came in quietly and took his seat near to her. Two men with revolvers in their belts came in at the same time, and seated themselves not far away. Under the circumstances, May was satisfied that they were a guard, but she paid no attention to them, greeting Neville with a friendly nod, while her face expressed gentle commiseration, without a shadow of suspicion. Fortunately she could speak to him without being overheard.

"You have got yourself into an elegant scrape, young man. Perhaps you don't know it, but you are in danger of your life. A man thinks he saw you part from a gang that was carrying a girl toward Blindman's Shaft, and some feminine fixings were found around there that makes the town think Miss Viola was taken there and left. Do you think Cyril has enough profit in her death to have arranged for it in that way?"

"Is this the truth? They have not made up this story to throw you—and me—off guard?"

"It is the very truth, unless I am more mistaken than I ever was in my life before. They found her footprints on the edge of the shaft."

"Footprints, perhaps, but did Viola ever stand over them? I tell you I would wager my life that she is in Cyril's hands; and I believe that he has arranged so as to throw suspicion on me. If he has that plan in view, I suspect you can make up your mind that he does not intend I shall ever leave Brace Box alive. What are they going to do?"

"They are going to have you up before a lynch court this evening, and probably make you climb a tree shortly thereafter. Take my advice, and get out of this before the storm really breaks."

"What? Run away?"

"Yes. Make your escape at once, as I think you can. It is unfortunate that both Oregon and Sam Ryan have not been around to-day. Indeed, I am almost certain that something has happened to them. Still, I think I can aid you, especially if I can find some of Ryan's friends. There is no time to argue. Will you go?"

"What? Flee like the guilty wretch they accuse me of being? Never!"

"Sorry for you, then, young man. Of course Cyril counts on just such obstinacy, and you are playing right into his hands. It is part of the scheme. If you were at liberty you might be looking for Viola. As it is, those who would honestly search for her are all on the wrong scent."

"Perhaps you are right; yet I stand my ground."

The sullen determination of his tone convinced

Merry May that argument would be of no avail. She did not wish to pose in public as his active and earnest friend, so she said no more, but, as she had finished her dinner, withdrew. Shortly afterward she left the hotel, going in search of Solid Sam, or his friends; and anxious, if possible, to learn what had become of Oregon.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTAIN GADLEY SMILES.

"CAPTAIN GADLEY" made his proposition as coolly as the average gallant declares his intentions under roof, and knowing that he stands well up in the list of eligibles. Viola North received it without any apparent surprise. To have seen her one would have thought that she was considering what answer should be given.

So she was, after a way; but the proposal had not surprised her a particle. She expected something of the kind. The question in her mind was whether she should or should not take back what she had vowed, and recognize the man as her cousin.

"Come!" he said, noting her hesitation, and guessing the cause of it.

"Why persist in this folly? You know that I am Cyril, and as I said, in substance, the same thing a number of years ago, you should have your answer ready by this time. If you think it a bad predicament why not make the best of it, anyhow? I mean every word I say, just as I meant it before; how can you doubt me? Why have you sought me out if it was not to answer? Take your time, but say yes."

He was a good-looking fellow—better looking, if anything, than Neville, and he seemed to grow in earnestness. He looked little like an outlaw just then.

"I will take back something of what I said," responded Viola, slowly.

"I will even admit that, from the outset, I knew you. But I have said that I will not consider any such offer—if you can call an offer anything said in the face of such an outrage—while I am your prisoner. I will only say that your course is bringing you into danger, and if I am detained here even a little longer my friends will organize such a pursuit that your capture and my release will be certain. After that, if you have any reason to fear the rope, you can guess the ending."

"Ha, ha! Just as brave as ever; and just as hopeful. It's a pity, truly a pity, to spoil these youthful illusions; but I assure you that, whatever danger may threaten others, I feel myself secure. I always did look out for number one pretty well. Now, there are double risks, and I take double precautions."

"Why, man alive, what precautions can avail when the whole district turns out to hunt you, led by such men as Neville North and Oregon? They have money enough to equip a regiment, and their nerve is fully equal to yours."

"My sweet cousin, if you are depending for assistance upon any one but yourself you are most egregiously off. The gentlemen you mention will not move a step; and all Brace Box will stay at home."

"Why?"

"That is my secret; and yet, I don't mind mentioning it to you."

"Your named leaders have their own affairs; and very pressing ones they seem to be. Take Oregon, for instance. I'm not sure that he's dead, but I'd sooner bet large that he was than that he wasn't. Last night he was led into a skillfully contrived ambushade, captured and carried away. Brace Box will know him no more."

"That hits you hard, does it? Well, there is Neville, then. He don't want to come out as a leader. In the first place he had a very strong notion that you fled to my sheltering arms. In the next place he couldn't come if he wanted. By a little finesse the camp was all thrown on the wrong scent. They believe that you were murdered and thrown into the Blindman's Shaft; the gentle Neville even now is under arrest as the principal in the crime. They may not elevate him at once, but it's dollars to cents that shortly after dark Judge Lynch's court will look the prisoner very firmly in the face and say, guilty; and no recommendation to mercy."

"Good heavens!"

There was the quiet accent of truth in Cyril's tones, so that Viola did not in the least doubt him.

"Yes. The heavens are very kind—to me. The disappearance of Oregon is a great point in my favor, though I may have something more to say about it hereafter. As the friend of the accused his absence will tell greatly against him. Indeed, I count on its largely assisting to cause his elevation."

"You fiend, you!"

Viola looked at her cousin in horror. If she had known less about him she might have supposed that Cyril was trying to alarm her, for it hardly seemed possible that in so brief a period of time such a villainous scheme could have been laid, and so far carried into execution.

At her exclamation Cyril laughed gayly.

"If I was not well aware that the feelings of my relative toward me are of the same unchristian nature I might feel some compunction. If he had me in as bad a predicament he would

not only say, 'Let him hang,' but he would cry for a tug at the rope. Then, why should I be unhappy, when I see myself about to be relieved of what, I confess, has always been a great annoyance? If I was sure of you, however, I won't say that I would not be willing to let him off with a good fright. Fiend yourself! What will you be if you don't save him, when you have the chance?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The easiest sort of a conundrum. Suppose, just as they were slipping the noose over his neck, you appeared on the scene and called a halt. I can see the eyes the crowd would make as you told them that all these deceptive indications were arranged so that you could run away from one cousin to marry another without interruption. You hold his life in your hand. Decide what is to become of it."

"I do not believe that you would allow the matter to go to such an extreme. If so—if he can make his escape in no other way—he must die. But I caution you to beware."

He turned quickly, and without answer. The young man who had obeyed his call a short time before, again made his appearance, holding a small purse in his hand as he entered.

"Excuse the interruption but I understood you to desire prompt investigation. This I suppose, is the article. At least, it bears the young lady's name. Number Six had it; Number Eight appeared to know nothing about it. What are your wishes?"

"Is Number Six hung yet?"

"No, sir. I desired to be certain that this was the right purse."

"Well, hang him, then. I will be along in ten minutes, to make sure that the work has been properly done."

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant withdrew and Cyril went on:

"I am certain you will be curious to know how this winds up, and so I assure you I intend that you shall see. You will then have a chance to know how our cousin will look after sentence has been executed. Meditate a few moments. If you can bring yourself to make proper answer to what I have asked you, of course you can be spared the double infliction. Otherwise I swear, you shall see them both."

Cyril left her to her own devices for a brief period; but though she glared around anxiously enough she saw nothing that suggested assistance in her plight.

The building that held her was probably never intended for a prison; but as far as she was concerned, it answered the purpose well enough. It was a rough hut, built very solidly of logs, and there was a stone fireplace at one end. The floor was furnished by the flat rock upon which the cabin was built, and the punchon door that was secured by bolts and bar inside and heavy hooks outside looked able to bar, either way, the progress of a regiment. There was a window, but outside of the window was a sentinel, so that escape in that way was shut off. Viola felt very much tempted to throw herself down upon the rough couch in the corner, and abandon herself to despair. If the window had been a little lower, or a little higher, she might have done so. On account of the difficult possibility she made an effort to peep into the outside world—and succeeded.

There was not much to be seen; but that little added to her loneliness.

The cabin was built upon a narrow ledge. She could not see the precipice that towered above her, but she could look down into the valley that seemed to be hundreds of feet below.

A rather pleasant nook it might otherwise have seemed, though somewhat shaded, and evidently the camping-place of the outlaws. She could see a dozen of them gathered around a common center.

There was an instant of confusion, and what looked to her like conflict. When it was over a man was being dragged away toward a tree that stood suggestively near. Even at that distance she could see the rope around his neck, and imagine what was to be his fate. Number Six had been called up to punishment parade.

The sight sickened her. She dropped down from her tiptoes, and resting her arms against the wall leaned her head against them.

"My heavens!" she muttered.

"It is a just punishment. Why should I have taken up the task because those whose duty it was failed? If this sight will haunt me for a lifetime what would it be if my hands knotted the rope?"

And yet, with feminine inconsistency, she raised her head to take another look. She felt that she could never be content unless she knew the ending of the scene, that had just had such a benumbing effect.

She had been crouching below the window sill longer than she knew. The struggle was over, the group of men had dispersed, and to the lower branch of the tree there hung a dark object which she knew to be a human body.

Again she drew back with a cry; and this was echoed by a laugh, as Cyril stepped into the room.

"I had intended to ask you to take a stroll with me, so that, incidentally, I could show you

a proof of my earnest intention to protect your interests, as well as the strict discipline that is maintained in Gadley's Gang. I see that is unnecessary. I will just lay down the facts in your case and leave you here to your reflections. If we come to terms, on the basis proposed, within the next hour, you will be in time to save Neville. If not there is little to be gained by haste, and I will allow you twenty-four hours for consideration. If, at the expiration of that time, you have not decided to give a favorable answer I shall commence employing a gentle pressure."

"Twenty-four hours may make quite a difference in the aspect of affairs. I think I shall do nothing rashly; and trust in Providence to protect both Neville and myself."

"Very well. To save your neck, which would most certainly be broken in any effort you might make to escape by going higher, I would say that the only exit from this spot is by a dangerous path down the ledge on which this cabin is built. You will be in plain view of the Gang, who are all at home, and will have to step over a guard whose beat is entirely on the ledge. An old lady, of more muscle than loving kindness, and who has a peculiar fancy for using a knife when irritated, will see that you don't starve. She will probably bring you a meal soon. Remember, you have one hour in which you can call me. After that it will be too late. I cannot see you until to-morrow—when, no doubt, I will be able to give you the latest tidings from Cousin Neville. *Au revoir.*"

With his usual laugh, and a wave of his shapely hand, he went out, leaving Viola alone with her sorrows.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TIGRESS TURNS.

THERE was nothing particular the matter with Oregon, except that he was senseless. The fugitive turned out to be a Tartar, as the Sport with a Scar had all along suspected; and got in his work a little neater than Oregon would have thought possible. Indeed, if that worthy could have thought at all he would not have been willing to believe that the shot was simply fired to "crease" him. When he recovered his mental faculties, after a time, remembering the point-blank range, he seriously asked himself if he was really alive.

That was not altogether strange, since, for a short season, his bodily powers remained paralyzed; and as a man has never been dead before, he can scarcely be expected to know exactly how it feels. Being trussed up made quite a difference in his feelings, also. He was not used to such kind of treatment.

If Oregon could have seen where he was going there might have been some slight shade of satisfaction. Unfortunately the cloth that had been bound around his head had also slipped down over his eyes, and literally and figuratively he was in the dark.

By and by he was dumped down, without the least regard to his health, and though he heard the footsteps of the men die away he had no idea of where he was, or why he had been brought there. He only knew that he was a prisoner, and that if he got away without suffering some evil he would be particularly lucky.

After a time his brain cleared, and strength came back to his limbs. By a little effort he succeeded in pushing the cloth from over his eyes.

That was some satisfaction; then he found he was still in the dark, and knew as little where he had been taken as he had done before.

"This Gang must own all Brace Box," he thought, "or else they've got nerve enough ter buck ther town. About how many jails hev they scattered 'round, or do they use the same one every time? Ef they do, there's some chance fur North ter come stumblin' in."

As Neville and Merry May had succeeded in making their escape, there was some hope for the future, and what surprised him most was that after two failures, the villains, whoever they were, should still be using the same tactics. That looked as though the enemy had little fear of outside interference, or else had so covered their tracks that if forced to move from one stronghold to another, it could be done without much danger of identification.

Of course there was no immediate danger threatening his life, or so much trouble would not have been taken to bring him there. What might happen to him if he refused to tell what he knew about the Norths, was a different matter, for he suspected that it was information his captors were after.

And to break a man's nerve, and oil his tongue, there would be no better recipe, than to thus leave him trussed up in the darkness, uncertain of his fate, and sure only of his own helplessness.

Unless they had planted him there for good, simply to get him out of the road, it was pretty certain that some one would turn up for an interview before very long.

Of course, Oregon was not the man to be much shaken by any course of treatment; and though he had been handled quite roughly, it would have been possible to make him feel a great deal more uncomfortable. After a few unavailing efforts to loosen himself, which only

served to show how securely he was fastened, the sport closed his eyes, and soon actually went to sleep—something, however, he could not have done later on.

Once in the land of dreams, and unless interrupted, he was likely to stay there for some time. He was tired, the hour was late, and around him was perfect silence.

A light shining upon his eyes caused him to move uneasily, but did not awaken him, though there was some one standing by his side, regarding him attentively.

The intruder was muffled in a loose, heavy cloak, and a broad-brimmed hat slanted down over the face so far as to be almost a disguise. Still, it was not hard to see that the figure was that of a woman, even before she threw back the cloak, and pushed up the brim of her hat.

Having, so to speak, unmasked herself, she held the lantern so that the rays fell fairly on her face, and then touched Oregon lightly with her foot.

The touch was sufficient. Instantly he was awake, his eyes wide open and staring at his visitor, who looked down on him with a mocking smile.

A very handsome face it was, and one that he certainly recognized. If he had been able to do it, he would have uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Pardon me," said the woman, "I did not notice that the work had been so thoroughly well done. I suppose you have too much sense to waste your breath in the higher keys. If you attempt it I shall certainly stop you, and the stoppage will be permanent."

She drew a knife as she spoke, and, having first held it so that he could see the weapon and understand the threat, she severed the cords that held the gag in its place. As he relieved his mouth of the unpleasant intruder, she continued:

"You have changed some, but I would have known you, if it was only by seeing you asleep with such odds against it. Of course you expected to wake up if you ever did, on the other side. It's my turn now, and you ought to know what that means."

"By ther rollin' wheels, it's Helen!"

The woman evidently expected more of an outburst. Perfectly safe though she was, she shrunk away a little from his side, watching him with her glittering eyes, and holding the knife in readiness to repel an attack.

"It's Helen," he continued, looking her over with an eye that was full of interest; "Helen, a little older, but just as handsome."

"You think, then, even at this late stage in the game, that you will try flattery."

"Flattery nothin'! I'm tellin' plain truth. Handsome's no name fur it. You are a beautiful devil, that a man's a fool ter git within a mile ov. Mebbe thar's some wuss in ther world, but I never seen 'em. What are you going ter do with me?"

"Can you ask that question? Tell the truth for once in your miserable six-penny life. What ought I to do with you? Don't you acknowledge that hanging is too good for you, and that I'll have to invent some means for your exit that will do justice to the subject?"

"Ef I hadn't thought you war dead I mout hev bin thinkin' it up; but I'll leave it to you. I s'pose you're bound ter be a widdier somehow; an' ez I allers war accommodatin', I won't break ther record. Hev yer own way."

"Widow! You do well to remind me of those miserable years of my life when you made me your slave. When I think of them I do not wonder you fancied me dead. I did die—to you. Now and then there is justice in the court, and I found it when they set me free from you forever. But they could not give me what I yearned for still more—revenge!"

"Ef I hed ever harmed yer," and there was an honest impressiveness in Oregon's voice that would have carried conviction if he had happened to have had any other listener, "you've had revenge enough fur ther wust I could have done. I won't say nothin ov ther gold yer robbed me ov. Since then coin hez come easy, an' I've hed plenty ter throw away. But you sent me jest ez far towa'ds ther bad ez a man ov my style would go; did yer level best ter hev me killed; an' wust ov all, stole away ther kid, ter make her ez bad ez yerself, an' took ther innercent leetle thing right down to her death. Ef you'd been honest an' true, we'd hed a happy home yet. 'Stead ov that, she's dead. I'm a wreck, an' you're—what you are. An' you come talkin' round about revenge! I wonder ther heavens don't drop."

"Bah! You wronged me enough when you linked the fortunes of a woman like me to an animal like you."

She drew her splendid form up to its full height, and looked down upon him with flashing eyes.

"That's ther full size ov it, then. I didn't suit, an' you wanted ter git all yer could outen me, an' then go away with another man. I b'lieve I killed him; an' ther wust war, I found out too late that you war tired ov him afore I done ther job. After that I hed hopes never ter see er bear ov yer ag'in."

"And yet you are here."

Oregon's former wife restrained herself by an effort, and managed to talk almost as calmly as he; listening for his answer in a way that showed she had an especial interest in it.

"Don't blame me fur that. Ef I'd 'a' knowed, I'd gone a thousand miles ter keep from seein' yer."

"Indeed! And yet you manage to place yourself where you can do me the most damage. As things stand, your friends are my foes; and you had the chance of your lifetime to harm me. I understand now why they have you with them."

"Blamed if I do, then, unless it's because I've been 'round some, have nerve, an' can find ther man they want."

"Why keep up the farce? You are after Cyril North."

"An' ef so what's that to you?"

"In one way, very little. In another, a great deal. Cyril North is or was the man you have just said that you killed. When you find him you find me. I have not decided yet whether to make my appearance as Cyril or as his relict. In either case you can understand that you are a decided incumbrance in the game, and that, having told you this much, I hardly intend to allow you a chance to let it go further."

"Thanks fur ther tellin', though I've hed more interestin' news, that war a heap sight nigher the truth. Talkin' plain, an' right from ther heart, I ain't b'lievin' a word yer say. Ef I did I'd ax yer what yer doin' hyer; but I'll git more informashun ef I put that question to some one else. Mebbe you wouldn't mind goin' away an' lettin me get my sleep out?"

"When I leave you for good you will be sleeping soundly enough; and there will be all eternity to finish the nap."

"Pears to me, ef you've bin talkin' straight, thet I slipped up once on a sure thing—mebbe you'll do ther same. You'll find Oregon mighty hard ter kill; an' a heap sight harder to git p'int out ov."

"Yet, to save your life, you might be willing to tell the truth."

"You turn quicker ner a whirly-gig. Reckon we're gittin' 'round at last to what yer after; an' it's gittin' time fur me ter go slow. What is it thet yer want? I kin tell yer yes er no."

"What then is the *real* motive for this pursuit of Cyril North? An angel would not be so anxious to put a fortune in his hands, if there was nothing beyond. You should know—speak and save your miserable life."

"Ef I knowed I reckon you might remember enough of me ter recollect I wouldn't give it away. But so fur ez I know thar's nothin' behind it. She wanted ter find Cyril an' set things straight. Ez Cyril hez found her that seems ter put me out ov ther game, unless I hev ter turn 'round an' hunt fur her."

He watched her keenly while he spoke. Had she either failed to understand him, or started at his mention of Cyril, he would have noted it. He began to believe that she had told some truth in regard to the Norths, and was prepared for what came next.

"In the guileless innocence of your heart that last is just what you would do; and until matters are arranged, one way or the other, that is just what we don't want you to do—Cyril and I. Positively, it was a great stroke when we got you out of the way. And you have no more information that could be of use?"

"No more! By ther rollin' wheels! I didn't know I'd bin givin' yer any."

"Then, aft'r all, the bargain is off. Your life is still in my hands; to dispose of as I choose; and of course you may know what to expect. However, I must consult with my dear Cyril before deciding finally on your fate."

"Ef I know anything about you there'll be a split between you an' yer dear Cyril afore very long. Mebbe you hev'n't seen Miss North with yer own eyes. I'd advise yer to do it afore yer trust Master Cyril too fur. A good suggestion, that; an' I don't charge a cent."

"Don't try to excite my jealousy. You ought to know that I don't deal much in that article. After all, the principal thing is to get you out of the way; and I think I have provided for that very neatly. If you never come out of this hole alive no one will ever be the wiser."

"Except ther four er five bullies thet did ther rough work. They won't work ther secret fur all it's wuth, ov course."

"You see the blot, do you? Rest easy. In whatever way it is done they must finish the job; and yet, they know less than you suppose. You have a few hours' grace. In that time you may be able to figure out a reason why you will be of more benefit alive than dead. If not—good-by, and over the range you go."

It was anything but a cheering outlook for Oregon as he lay for hours, alone in the darkness. Though it was not intended, his bonds were killing him. Under their pressure, his flesh was swelling, until he was ready to admit that he was dying a thousand deaths, and yet he never groaned.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VISIT UP THE GULCH.

MERRY MAY was inclined to be cautious. She understood that there was some one in Brace

Box that was playing a strong hand against the Norths; and the apparent recklessness with which they stocked the cards made her believe that there must be heavy backing somewhere.

As a stranger in the town she hardly knew which way to turn for assistance—if she had only had a trail to follow she would not probably have sought for any.

She had confidence in Solid Sam. He was rough—rougher in some respects than Oregon—but there was a straight, up-and-down method about him that made her believe he would not be anything but an open foe. Plots and plotting did not belong to his nature.

But Ryan had disappeared, and her cautious inquiries brought no answer as to where he had gone to.

If he could not be found the next thing was to look for his friends; and even in that she moved carefully. She might have been puzzled if it had not been for a small boy. The tribe is universally useful in carrying information, and this specimen happened to be a regular mine of it.

"Who's Solid Sam's pard? Well, I reckon it's Ben Gunn you're lookin' for; and if you can't find him, why keep your eyes open for Lanty McGuire. I seen him loafin' 'round Jimmy Bower's about all mornin'. Tell you, pard, there's been some high old times 'round there, and Brace Box is goin' to clean 'em out to-night."

"Thanks, my friend; but I'm not looking for any one very hard. I heard so much about him and the band he took in regulating the town, that I wondered whether he had a crowd behind him."

"He's his own crowd, pretty much, but you can most often find Ben and Lanty around the outskirts. So long! I must hustle 'round and hear the news."

Young importance moved away just when May was thinking how she could get rid of him.

"Blessings on the boys," she thought. "They put on heaps of size sometimes, but if you treat them right you can trust them every time. I wonder if I can say as much for Lanty McGuire when I find him."

There was no trouble in finding Lanty. He was unobtrusively lounging around Jimmy's, talking just about as freely as usual, and in no way appearing to have any especial care on his mind. All the time, however, he was keeping a keen lookout for what was going on. Merry May would not have deceived him even if he had not received a hint from Sam. He knew that she was after information at her first word.

"Yes, miss, I do that same, fur Sam tould me just where he was after goin', and if I could let you know where he was I'd be jumpin' wid joy. But it's out of town that he is, and I was to kape an eye out tell he and Gunn got back. By the same token he said you'd most loike come prowlin' 'round, and I should let you have all that was in the shop."

Lanty spoke with brogue enough to show he was an Irishman, but for the most part had become fairly Americanized. His voice was pitched in a key a good deal milder than the one he generally delighted in, and he was careful to see that no outsider was near enough to overhear the conversation.

"There's going to be trouble about that young man in there. Ryan knows, and so do I, that he's innocent; but when a mob gets up it's not much use to argue until their fling is over. Sam ought to be here."

"Thru for you, miss, an that's just what the solid man thinks. The best way to sit down on 'em is to show the corpus, alive and kickin'. That's what he's after now, and if they give him toime he'll bring her."

"Then he has found a clew—and a better one than that crowd of hoodlums came across at Blindman's Gulch. Of course I don't take much stock in that nonsense about her having been thrown down the shaft."

"But they found her shoes and socks?" retorted Lanty, interrogatively.

"That may be, though I haven't seen them yet to swear to. But there's nobody knows that she was in them when they came to the gulch. The shoes might have gone one way and she gone the other."

"Hit it big, miss, on the foorst turn. Sam, he's onto some one that left the nayborhood av the shanty up the gulch. He and Ben tuk to the mountains and left me to kape an eye on what's going on. Better kape out av the way and let Sam run the menadgery."

"Thanks! I hope he will be back in time. I don't like the looks of things. The town is in a ferment, and there is a little army already in the hills. If they don't find her, there will be trouble. Better look up your friends, and if you need money to get them to work on the side of law and order, draw on me."

"All right, miss; you'll find us all around, and if it comes to a foight, a hard one it will be; but we want to make them show their hand. And you look out for yourself. If they haven't killed you, it's not their fault. They set the game, but it didn't go their way."

"Thanks for the warning, but they can hardly harm a woman by daylight, and after dark I'll keep my eyes open. Did Sam say anything

about Oregon? He went off on a likely trail last night, and hasn't turned up yet. I'm afraid something has happened to him."

"Niver a word. The young man seemed to be of age, and ought to be able to take care of himself, but I'll see if anything can be done for him. Just tell me where you saw him last, and where he was going. We've talked too long as it is."

Very briefly she answered, and then added:

"See here, McGuire. Solid Sam's out of town, Charley Coldeard is out of town, Oregon is missing, and I don't hear anything of Colonel Rollins. Has anything happened to him? With all the chiefs away, it's a mighty good time for the rats to play."

"Thar ain't but one chief left in town, an' that's leetle, teeny, teenty Paul Morrison! Ef yer wants a chief, you'd better see him. He, he, he!"

Coming from they knew not where, and not seen until he spoke, Chestnut Chink stood at Merry May's shoulder, and threw in his bit of advice. He looked a little the worse for the adventures of the preceding night, since his clothing had some extra tears, and there was a patch of black court-plaster above his left eye that heightened the pallor of his face by contrast.

"Av ye want a chief, there's Mister Chink himself. Ye can hould swate converse with him. I must be goin'."

Lanty winked with the eye furthest from Chestnut, bowed grandly, and left May to follow his suggestion or not, as it seemed best to her. She looked at Chestnut quite gravely.

"I interviewed Paul Morrison and his wife last night, and it struck me they were frauds."

Some singular things happened afterward, in which you were more or less concerned. Brace Box may be principally occupied by thieves and cut-throats, but there are some honest people in it, and I suspect if I told them the facts as they occurred, they might go visitin' up the gulch, and hang you on the same tree; still, if you lead the way, I wouldn't mind going along. If they can't tell what has become of the Sport with a Scar, I don't know who can."

"Paul Morrison kin tell most anythin'—if you only b'lieve him. I'm goin' that way now; ef yer wants ter ketch on, ketch."

Merry May had spoken without thought, but she was not the sort of person to back down from a square proposal after she had once made one, though she began to suspect that this acceptance of Chestnut's had something behind it. She walked slowly by his side, talking as they went. When she had asked half a dozen questions in regard to the trouble at his dug-out the night before, and digested his answers, she was more in the dark than ever about Chink. Certain she was that some one had made a mistake. Whether it was Oregon, herself, or the world at large was more than she could tell.

They reached the Morrison cabin at last, attracting no attention on the way.

By daylight the cabin looked larger than at night, though Merry May could not help but note what a deceiving place it was in looks.

Chestnut knocked at the door two or three times without hearing any answer. They had turned to go away, when May heard a voice that she recognized as belonging to Paul Morrison himself.

She had not seen him at Brace Box, though he was coming straight from there.

He bowed politely, raised his hat, and said:

"I believe you are acquainted with the inside of our cabin, so that I have no hesitancy in admitting you; but unless you can vouch for this gentleman as your friend, I should prefer not to admit him. He can wait for you outside, and I would advise him not to be caught listening at the window."

There was some change in the manner of the man since the night before. May noticed, also, that, like Chestnut Chink, his head was lightly bandaged. Probably it was no mistake when she thought she saw him stricken down.

Chestnut did not appear at all offended. He gave his familiar giggle, put his hands in his pockets, shrugged his shoulders, and moved away.

"A dangerous young man," said Morrison gravely as he turned the key in the door, and motioned Merry May to enter. "It is as well to beware of him. Now tell the old man what it is that you want him to do for you. Helen is not here; but so far as possible I will take her place. I was mistaken in you last night, but that was the fault of the young villain we left outside. And Helen was never deceived. We bear you no ill will for doing what you could for your friend. Yet it might have been better for you both if she had come herself. It might, at least, have saved some uneasiness on your part, and the necessity for some desperate work."

"Perhaps; but it's too late to worry about that now. Miss North has disappeared and her cousin is in a fair way to be the victim of Judge Lynch. Moreover, a man known only as Oregon, who was engaged by them as a guide through these regions, has also vanished. I seem to be the only friend they have, though almost a stranger, and I ought to be doing something for them. Can you help me?"

"My dear child, we are doing all we can, Helen and I. The thing came upon us so suddenly that for the present the advantage is with the outlaws; but I assure you, in strict confidence, that for the future it will not be so. After you left us last night we began to arrange matters. We have a few friends, and though we be few and the villains be many I think I can promise that they will be check-mated. Helen is even now prefecting arrangements for the rescue of Miss North, who, I may say of a certainty, is in the hands of Gadley's Gang. But, my dear young lady! What is the matter? You look—let me get you a glass of water."

"You treacherous brute!" muttered Merry May, feeling for her derringers, while her face grew ghastly pale.

"You have drugged me, somehow between you, but I'll get even yet."

She talked slower and lower. Before she could draw her weapons strength had left her. A few moments more, and she lay motionless in the arms of Paul Morrison.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TROUBLE WITH SAM.

SOLID SAM had not the slightest intention of deserting Neville, when by chance he met Lanty McGuire and told him he was going out of town. He dropped to a stranger leaving the vicinity of the house up the gulch, and was satisfied that he was worth the following if he went out of town without stopping anywhere else.

Very carefully Ryan shadowed the young man, keeping Gunn still further in the background, though ready to close up at a moment's notice.

Of course they might have made an attempt to capture the stranger in the first place; but, though he had a strong idea that he was a confederate of the kidnappers, unless he could be scared into a confession, he could not see that his immediate capture would assist Neville North.

He might not talk at all; and proof that would convince himself, would be worth very little with the crowd, ignorant as it must be of the proceeding of the night before.

"It seems like blamed poor policy ter let him go streaking off like that," thought Sam to himself, "an' mebbe I'll trip an' git a stumble, but if I kin hold my own till he gits thar, I'll bet three apples to a green gooseberry that he takes me to ther young lady herself, an' that's what I'm after."

The man seemed to have no suspicion of being followed, or if he had, it gave him no trouble. Either by luck or care he left Brace Box without attracting the attention or meeting any one else. To avoid being seen by him, Sam took some chances of losing him, but every time it turned out that the risk had been a safe one, for he struck the trail again without any difficulty.

For some miles the man followed the regular road, never once looking back, or manifesting the least uneasiness. He strode along like a good pedestrian who has a long walk before him, and Ryan at last began to think that perhaps he had made a mistake. It would not be so easy to overhaul his game as it would have been in town, and he was evidently in for a longer walk than he had expected.

Suddenly the man turned off from the trail. He did not go in haste, or show that he had at all altered his plans, yet it was possible that he had halted to take a look to his rear. Sam and his pard crouched down a moment till they could take in the lay of the land and decide what was best to be done.

"Fooled, by mighty!" muttered Sam, while Ben held up his hand.

They heard hoof strokes stretching away at a hard gallop. A horse had been concealed somewhere in the bushes and the man was off and away.

"He seems ter foller some sort of a trail. Ev we've lost him I'll bet a dollar he's left a p'inter. We'll go along a piece. We may get onto more ner we expected. An' we needn't be too keeful fur a bit. Ef he don't stop we ain't goin' ter ketch him, you bet."

They never would have suspected the existence of this trail if they had not been led into it. When they had gone a few rods off of the main road it led on upward as far as they could see; still the man they were after was not in sight, though they could still hear the distant fall of hoofs. After ten minutes of solid walking they came to where another path branched off. Of course neither was traveled like the main road, but there were plenty of marks to show that it was traveled from time to time.

The branch path led between hills, first rising and then falling. They followed it for what seemed to be a long while.

"I b'lieve we're gettin' hot," said Sam, as they looked down in the little valley, and saw what seemed to be the top of a dug-out, so hidden in the bank that it would have escaped any but very careful eyes.

"Most too easy ter find, pard. Might be a sort er stoppin'-place, an' he may be in thar holdin' a palaver with some one; but, they

wouldn't be tryin' ter *hide* thar. Keep an eye out an' p'raps we'll see their looker-out."

There was no one in sight, however, and they approached cautiously, keeping under cover as they went, until they could obtain a glimpse of the doorway.

They could see right in and the place appeared empty. It might be nothing but a miner's deserted cabin; and the man they were after might not have gone anywhere near it. Caution was hardly needed, and yet the could have sworn they could not have employed more of it than they did, until, at last they were almost at the door.

Then Sam pointed. At the distance of a few yards they could distinctly see the impression of a horse's feet, tending directly toward the door. The animal could scarcely have gone into the cabin; yet where else could he have gone to? They listened intently, but could not hear a sound, and altogether felt quite puzzled.

Ryan was determined to know more. Leaving Ben on guard, he crept closer, until he was crouching in the doorway, and could see that the room was entirely empty, though there were signs of late occupancy.

"Come on, Gunn!" he called, in a low voice. "There's danger sittin' out thar av some one gittin' an eye on yer. It's empty hyer, but thar's sign."

It was a little strange that the cabin should have been left so if Viola had really been there; though it was possible the occupants had been suddenly frightened away. Gunn came in and the two stared around.

There was a fire-place, a cracker-box for a seat, and a couch of branches over which were spread several blankets. There were a few cooking utensils that might be carried on a man's back, and altogether it looked like a prospector's cabin—the temporary residence of a man who was satisfied with a few of the necessities of life.

"I don't see none ov yer sign, Sam. (Guess we're wide off."

"Very wide!" laughed a voice, in answer to Gunn's complaint. "Hands up, pards, or over you go!"

Their man was in front of them, in the doorway, with a six in either hand. They might have discussed the question with him; but behind them they heard two hammers click strong as they went back, a hand dropped on a shoulder of each, while the cold muzzle of a pistol went against the ear a little above either hand.

"Now, boys," continued the spokesman, "I don't want any nonsense, and I don't want to have to hurt you; but you are so fresh I must salt you away to keep you for awhile. If you behave yourselves for a couple days, I'll send you home rejoicing. If you don't, if you're ever found, it will be with a lead shaft about the sternum. You can think it over as you go along. For the present you'll have to step out, and that lively. Confound you, what did you mix in this thing for, anyhow? March them out, boys!"

And so, as the pards understood the situation thoroughly, and had as much judgment as nerve, they stepped off without demur, and continued stepping, far into the mountains.

This was the reason that Solid Sam and Ben Gunn did not put in their appearance at Judge Lynch's necktie party.

CHAPTER XXVI.

OREGON ON DECK.

OREGON lay senseless in the darkness.

He had not thrown up his cards of his own accord. In fact he had held on to consciousness with a nerve that not one man in ten thousand would have shown, and kept back to the end the shouts and groans he might have uttered had he not known them to be useless.

A trial or two of the cords at his wrists convinced him that struggling was vain, and after that he just took passively what the fates sent him. An hour—a half hour—perhaps a few more minutes of this, and then would have come, for him, the end of all things.

When once more he knew anything, the most excruciating pains were darting through his arms, his legs, and over his whole body. The rack was nothing to them. He doubted if he could bear them a moment more and live.

Next, he knew that some one had poured whisky between his lips, and was rubbing him with no very gentle force. It was the reviving circulation that was giving him all this pain.

At first he would have thanked his preserver if he had ceased these efforts, and allowed him to die. In a little while, he was only afraid that he would. Consciousness began to broaden, and he understood better what was being done for him.

He was no longer in utter darkness, though the lantern that stood a few feet away, scarcely gave light enough for him, in his state of confusion, to see very clearly who it was that had come to his rescue.

By and by, however, he heard a chuckle that sounded familiar.

"Ther roarin' lion kin roll 'round in ther net, but he can't git out till ther leetle, teetle, teenty mouse comes. He, he! An' Paul Morrison's a

good leetle man ter tie to. Brace up, pard! Yer won't go over ther range this time."

"By ther rollin' wheels, it's Chestnut!"

Oregon was doubly surprised. He would not have given Chink credit for either the will or the wit to come to his rescue.

"It's Chestnut, pard! and he wants ter git yer outen this jest too quick. Thar's work ter be done, big work, an' you've bin wastin' a day, snoozin' hyer at yer ease. Kin yer stand?"

It was premature for the effort, but Oregon made it and found that he could stand, though that was about all. He held on to Chestnut's shoulder, and at first nearly capsized them both.

"Oh, you'll do," said Chink, with a satisfied intonation to his voice.

"Let me lead yer an' step 'round a bit. Ef yer can't hold level an' shoot I dunno ez I want yer whar I'm goin'. Sure yer got yer senses, now?"

Oregon made so vigorous an effort to obey that he came near to throwing himself sprawling, and Chestnut with him. Strength came back slowly.

"I'm nearder gone than I thort fur, but I kin hold my sizes ef you can find 'em. They may be lyin' 'round in the corner somewhar—but it's more ner likely they didn't run no risks. The cussed she-tiger don't make sich mistakes ez those. Whar d'yer want ter take me?"

"Jest ez soon ez you kin travel I want yer ter 'pear ez witness afore a Judge Lynch law-court. That young kid's chances ain't gittin' no brighter fast, an' he won't run ner fight. Thet's what he sez; but mebbe ef he seen ther noose he might jump big ter git outen it."

"An' hez nothin' been heard yet of Miss North?"

"Nothin'—ef Paul Morrison an' his purty wife ain't got onto ther trail. They're all a-swearin' thet she's gone through ther flume, an' wantin' ter send ther young man after her. They're goin' ter try it on most mighty soon, an' you hed order be thar."

"Ah! I can hardly understand it. What, him? Young North! Help me outen this. Ther fools they was ter come ter Brace Box; an' ther bigger fools not ter tell me what big hands would be played ag'in' 'em. You ain't much on a row, but you kin help me thar as well ez a better man."

"Don't shout too loud, pard. Thar may be some 'un watchin'. Ef it hadn't been fur leetle, teetle, teenty Paul I wouldn't a-dropped ter this. He war busy er he'd come along."

"Thar ye go ag'in. Ef he's ez big a fraud ez you be, I'd order shoot yer both. Mbebe I'll hev to yet. What's Paul a-doin', and whar are we now?"

"Ye'r jest whar Merry May war when they couldn't hold her; an' he's a-nussin' that leetle bit of furs an' fire. Some 'un tried ter p'izen her. But she'll climb up this time, hunkey dory."

"Poison! Who? Merry May?"

"Yes, I tell yer, thar's bad men in Brace Box, an' wuss outside. You folks have struck ther worstest ov all."

Chestnut was talking to gain a little time, for Oregon was hardly yet able to journey alone, and he was rather a large armful to carry. It was about as safe, and a good deal more comfortable, to run the risk of an interruption there, as to take the sport out before he was able to care for himself.

But Oregon suspected something of the kind, and had seen a prospect of having his hands full from the news he had already heard. He quit asking questions, and began to give orders. When Chestnut saw that he was really in earnest he led him away.

Darkness had settled down on Brace Box, as the two men made their way toward Jimmy's.

As yet court had not convened, but there was a portentous stir on the street, and when they reached the hotel, Oregon did not have to look twice to decide that it was under guard, though the men on the watch endeavored to mask their purpose.

"An' now, Chestnut, ef they'll only jest hold off tell I git some supper, dinn'r, an' breakfast all rolled tergether, I'll be ready fur ther next move in ther game. Mebbe you'd better scout around while I peck grub. Thar's no presbus time ter waste."

Oregon was weakened by both fast and confinement, but he believed it would only be temporary; and, weak or not, he intended to be on hand when the trouble began. Just now, much as he wanted to see Neville, he felt that there was something more important.

The boarders had all eaten and gone, and there was no one at the table but Jimmy Bower.

His eyes expanded to the size of saucers when he saw the Sport with a Scar come staggering into the room and take a seat at the other end of the board.

Perhaps he had no evil intentions, but he hastily rose to his feet, and would have left the room.

"A minute, Jimmy."

Oregon leaned toward the landlord, and crooked his finger.

"Don't rush matters. I'm not a reg'lar; but

with ther table set, an' me ther biggest kind of hungry, I'll be hyar fur a few minnits yit. I'll be takin' part in ther evenin's exercises funder on. Jest take it easy, an' give me a leetle ov yer presence now, while I talk the matter over. How did yer come ter light onto Mister North? It'd take a man ov real genius to git so fur outen ther right way."

There was no threat in the words of the sport, and he never looked less dangerous, but somehow Jimmy changed his intentions very suddenly. He moved down to Oregon, and gave him his view of the affair as straight as a string.

A rather plausible story he made of it, and he wound up by saying:

"Ov all the queer rackets in Brace Box this are ther fu'st one thet opened out in my house. I ain't standin' it, an' I'm backin' jestic. Sorry ter say it, es he's your pard, but they're goin' ter hang him, sure. An' ef you git too fur forward they'll be apt ter hang you too. I beered more ner one ov 'em sayin' that you an' him war in ther same boat."

"I b'lieve they're hangin' him now," said Oregon, coldly, and rising slowly. He had just heard a hum outside, and the tramp of numerous feet. It was earlier than he had expected the camp to rise, but he had not taken into account the ferment of the day, or the fresh impetus that had just been received from a late discovery.

"Don't you go near 'em," whispered Bower, as Oregon, a good deal the stronger for his meal, started toward the door.

"They're howlin' hyenas, I tell yer, an' you'd stir 'em up mad ez ho'nets, an' twice ez thick, ef you went 'round 'em now."

"Thanks, Jimmy; but Oregon can't be bluffed. I'll stand my chances with the crowd, and if my time ter go under hez arrove I'll have to go. But, Jimmy, old man, I'm counsel for the prisoner, if no one better turns up, an' I'd like most mighty well to see my client fur a moment afore ther frolic begins."

"I'm reasonable, Mister Oregon, an' I don't object, though I'm responsible fur his 'pearance. I've treated him squar' ez I could, an' nobody'll be gladder than me ef he shows up innercent. But then, the girl! I wouldn't be white ef it r'ile me clean to the bottom ter think ov what's her fate, and who brung it. But ye'll find him in ther little bedroom, back ov ther office. Ther shutters are closed, an' ther's a man watchin' him. Oh! go ter thunder!"

Oregon's patience had become exhausted at the way Jimmy was wasting time. Without a word he walked away, leaving Bower to finish his address to the dishes.

It was not hard to find Neville, or to gain admittance to him; but it was impossible to have any confidential talk, since the room was too small to get out of hearing of Billy Devan, who sat, solemn as an owl, with a cocked revolver resting across his knees.

That made little difference.

All the world might have heard what Oregon had to say.

"It's a put-up job. North an' you war a fool not ter kick hard when they began ter open ther game. Colcard's bin fooled outen town. Solid Sam's missin', an' Killer Rollins ain't bin seen ter day. They're goin' ter try ter kerry it through with a whoop. When they git tired, an' quit, Brace Box'll know a thing er two 'bout ther men that want ter be chiefs. Ef ye'r bent ter stand a trial I'll be with yer in a minnit. Keep yer head cool an' eyes open. Ef we don't hev a fair show they'll hev ter fight, an' don't you forgit it. I'll be hyar ag'in in a minnit. They've had me in a box all day, an' tried hard ter kill Merry May."

Without giving North time to reply he slipped out, and away to Neville's room. He knew there was a pair of heavy revolvers in the young man's trunk, and he wanted them.

It only took a minute, and feeling as though he had gained the strength of a dozen men, he came running back just as a cry from a regular mob outside rent the air. There was no longer any question—Judge Lynch's court was about to be convened.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A LOCK OF HAIR.

At first Neville North thought a great deal more about Viola and the chance of her having sloped with their cousin than he did about his own predicament. The accusation seemed so supremely ridiculous that it hardly was worth while to express his indignation. He did not think it worth while to even protest when Jimmy Bower placed him under surveillance.

The warnings he received from Solid Sam and the young lady gambler opened his eyes somewhat, and what he was able to pick up during the afternoon showed him still more the seriousness of the charges against him.

He began to think less of Cyril and more of Viola; in the end becoming much alarmed for her safety, as well as seriously troubled about himself.

If he had understood better the nature of a frontier mob, and the apparent proofs that had been accumulating against him he might well have dreaded facing the court that he had good

reason to believe would be extemporized for his benefit.

Oregon's visit, brief though it was, had done him good. He felt as though he was not altogether deserted. If it gave him a better idea of the strange combination against him, it woke him up to resistance, making him at least able to talk for himself, if there was no chance to fight.

And it came just at the right time.

Hardly had the Sport with the Scar vanished from the little room when Jimmy Bower entered, leaving at the door two or three citizens who had detailed themselves as an escort.

He came as though he expected to find resistance, for he carried his revolver conveniently in his hand. When he saw that there was no one there but Billy Devan and the prisoner he looked somewhat disappointed; but, he asked no questions about Oregon, turning his attention directly to the important matter on hand.

"Very sorry, Mister North," he began. "This hyer never had ther like happen in my house, an' I hope it won't ag'in. Real ladies are scarce in Brace Box, an' when anything happens to one it wakes ther citizens up like thunder. They're all outside, waitin' ter hear what yer got ter say, and hyer's a committee ter inter-dooze you. Ef you've no objections we'll adjourn outside."

"Why, you hoary headed old hypocrite. You know I can't object. There's enough of you to take me out in little pieces if I did, and I'm not sure but what that is the very thing you want to do. I'll go out and meet the people, and tell them the plain truth. Some one has been leading them all the wrong way, or long before this they would have found out where Viola went to."

Neville spoke indignantly, looking as though he would like to choke Bower, and for a small bonus would undertake the operation; but Jimmy never ruffled a feather, answering gravely:

"They all reckon they know well enough whar she went to, an' ther only thing they're goin' ter decide on now is whether you had her put thar. I wouldn't advise yer ter talk at large till yer hears what ther court hes got ter say."

As he spoke Jimmy stepped to one side and pointed to the door outside of which the escort stood.

Neville looked at them with strange coolness. His life was in danger and yet he did not realize it; or if he did, he felt very much less alarm than he would have thought possible before experiencing the sensation. Just now the prominent feeling was one of satisfaction.

Rather queer, that; but in the then sedate, respectable miners, who approached the situation with all due gravity, there looked to be a desire for justice. Perhaps the mob behind them might be just as desirous of justice.

"I am ready to offer any explanations that the citizens of Brace Box may think they are entitled to. Under other circumstances I would of course deny their right to inquire, but here, where law is administered as in a state of nature, I shall not question the jurisdiction of the Court. Lead on."

For a wonder Neville was not speaking over the heads of his auditors. The three were all men who had started life in a widely different sphere.

"You will probably have a fair chance for your life, the only trouble being that so many of the crowd has formed his opinion beforehand. There are some who think Miss North is not dead, but that you are responsible for her disappearance, and they may want to ask questions after Vigilante style that is very unpleasant to an innocent man. Keep cool, young man, and if you are innocent don't throw away a chance, or lose your head."

"And if I were guilty?"

"The advice would be useless. You'd look after those things anyhow."

"Thanks. Your answer shows what I suspected, that you do not believe in my guilt. I hope to bring every one else to your way of thinking."

The conversation took place in a low tone, as they went along; the answer of the miner was cut short by the roar of the crowd, as they came out into the open air.

The cry was not as savage as it might have been. There is the growl of a beast as a beast; and then there is the ravening growl when it is about to hurl itself on its prey. When the latter snarl is heard from a mob it is certain that blood or death only can quiet it.

Not but what some there were savage enough; but the mass claimed to be still open to conviction—whether honestly or not was a different thing.

"Feller-citizens!" said Bower, "reckon I set this ball a-rollin' in this d'rection, an' I can't say I'm sorry, since I know it's only turnin' on ther wheels ov jestic; but I ain't runnin' things, an' hadn't orter. It war at my house this thing happened an' so, ov course I want it cleared up er know ther reason why. I move Colonel Rollins takes ther cheer."

"Killer ain't hyer!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

"I move we choose Billy."

The alternative was suggested quickly and carried through with a rush. Billy—and every body knew that the saloon-keeper who ran "The Bower" was meant—was well known, but was not exactly the man that would have been chosen on sober second thought. He came forward without hesitation, and rose to the dignity of the occasion without an effort.

"There's a prisoner, I understand. Bring him forward and we'll get up a jury. Brace Box has done me proud by this honor and I'll see that things are run up to the handle."

At Billy's invitation Neville stepped forward. The guard was there, as well as the presiding judge, and there was still room on the porch for the jury. In the level street the throng had collected, the sea of upturned faces showing grimly in the light from the lanterns that had hung in front of the house.

A cry greeted North's appearance, and there was a surge forward that looked as though it might mean danger.

Billy drew his revolvers and laid them ostentatiously on the table at his elbow.

"Don't try to take a snap judgment on the young man or there will be some lively spatterment, sure. Prisoner at the bar, have you anything to say about this jury we are going to select? You'll have your challenges, afterward, of course."

"I suppose you are addressing me," answered Neville. "Any men will suit well enough so that you all vouch for their being honest. Pick them out of the crowd as they come, and begin with the nearest to you."

"As good as wheat, that! Here, half a dozen of you, move a peg higher. Mount the porch and we'll swear you in."

This method of selecting a jury was simple, and saved time. Without delay the six were told off and sworn, Billy glibly repeating the form of an oath that seemed good enough for all practical purposes, and Neville not objecting to either the number or composition.

"Now, Bower, we don't need any prosecuting attorney here to coax any one to tell a lie. Just give us the facts in the case as you know them, and don't get further from the truth than you can help. Ef we catch you—good-by, Jimmy! That warning ought to be better than an oath, but to make sure we'll swear you, too."

Bower's story is already known to the reader. Though it was no news to the majority of the audience, an angry hum went up as he explained how, at the request of Neville he had sent Miss Viola to him. He recognized the prisoner positively as the man he had left in the dining-room, and as if to make identification certain, here was a package of papers undeniably belonging to North, that had been found on the table. They had been at his elbow when he sent for Viola; he had probably forgotten them in his haste.

Then followed an account of how, a few hours later, the accused had come to him and stated that his cousin was missing. His manner was sullen, and according to Jimmy's idea, not at all that of an honest man, startled by such a discovery.

There was a letter found in Miss North's room which Neville declared to have been written by another cousin—Cyril—for whom they had been searching; but Jimmy felt confident that the writing was the same as that in the hotel register which he had seen Neville pen. When he had seen this letter, he decided that the prisoner had overreached himself, and immediately put him under arrest. Kept the matter as quiet as he could until further investigations had been made. Didn't want trouble at his house. Neville took the arrest very quietly, as though expecting it. As an innocent man, he should have knocked him—Bower—down. Parties had been searching in every direction ever since, but he believed they had found no traces except in the neighborhood of Blindman's Shaft.

Neville would have asked a few questions, but Judge Billy ruled differently. He said the prisoner should wait until the prosecution was closed, when he could ask all his questions in a lump. Then he called Happy Saul.

Saul's story has already been given. As the longer he thought it over the more certain he was had recognized Neville, his evidence made things look blacker than ever. When he came down to the discovery of shoes and stockings, and afterward the hat at the shaft, Neville, as well as the most of the auditors, thought the worst had been reached. He looked around at North, as if expecting some cross-questions, and as none came, he put on his hat and stepped down.

"Call Ebenezer White."

Billy spoke with a flourish. In general society the man was never known by any other name than Long Ebe. He was a good-natured good-for-nothing, about town, but he was one of the best of trailers and mightiest hunters outside of it.

"You can warble your little song now, Ebenezer. It seems to fit in with the rest pretty well if I've heard it straight."

Ebenezer had started off on the trail—or rather to hunt one—by himself, and had found nothing. Then he heard what had been found

down at the shaft, and had gone there almost alone that afternoon.

The tracks around the edge of the shaft were so beaten into one another as to tell nothing, but he had let himself down with a rope to the edge of the water, and there, caught on a projecting snag he had found—this.

He held up something in his hand that was not visible half a dozen yards away, but the cry of those nearest showed that it was a genuine surprise, while Jimmy Bower, unable to repress his excitement shouted:

"An' ef it aint a lock of her hair I'll eat snakes! I know it an' I'll swear to it. Ef that ain't enough ov a corpus ter hold a inquest on I want to know."

And true it was that between his fingers, matted and twisted, with ends irregular where it had broken, Ebenezer held a little lock of Viola's hair.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MOTION BEFORE THE COURT.

As Long Ebe held up the fragment of a tress, and Jimmy Bower uttered his declaration, a strange thing happened.

The crowd, that had been boisterous in its expressions of opinion, became silent while Neville North, who, so far, had listened to the proceedings with contemptuous silence, gave a great cry, that was heard to the very outskirts of the hushed assembly.

Up to this moment he had doubted if any harm had happened to his cousin other than falling into the hands of Cyril; now he was ready to believe that, innocent as he himself might be of the crime, there was more excuse for this court than he would have admitted a few moments before. Some one had done her to death, and he knew that some one must have been Cyril. How could he, in the face of Happy Saul's story, convince the crowd that it was not himself?

His very excitement at this last revelation told against him. The storm was just on the verge of breaking. Had not Billy held up his hand with an imperative gesture, that seemed to tell that there was more to come, the rush would have begun.

Billy—and not one man of a score in Brace Box knew him by any other name—played his part well.

"Just a little patience, gentlemen, until we get to the bottom of this. Don't crowd the court, because you have placed in its hands the right to uphold its dignity. The testimony seems to point to the prisoner as the man who planned the deed; but I understand that there is evidence to show the motive, and who it was committed the murder. The jury are looking after the interests of justice; outsiders will please not interfere."

Some of the jury looked a little uncomfortable; others smiled and let their hands rest alongside of their revolvers. The three men on guard were silent and serious. Whether they believed Neville guilty or innocent, the men on the porch appeared resolved to defend him until the judgment of the court was pronounced.

Judge Lynch turned to Neville.

"You understand we can't make you a witness against yourself; but perhaps you would be willing to answer a few questions."

"I am as much interested as any here in having the whole truth known. No questions you can ask will be refused an answer if they fairly bear on the subject. I had formed a theory, but this last witness has shaken my belief. I cannot think that Cyril is insane enough to commit such a crime; yet, from the testimony of the gentleman you call Happy Saul, I am almost bound to believe it."

"You were seen in the company of several men, who afterward went in the direction of Blindman's. Who were those men?"

"It is a mistake—though a natural one. Cyril North, my cousin, was most likely the person Happy Saul saw. When he chooses he can look enough like me to deceive even my friends."

"Ab, we have heard something of him, but we never saw him. Was not the man known as Oregon one of the party?"

"I know nothing of the party; but I can vouch for it that Oregon was not with it."

"And are you sure that the woman who came in the stage with Miss North was not another?"

"I repeat, I know nothing of the party; but she could not have been there. It was she who informed me of Viola's disappearance."

"If they were friends how does it come they took no part in the search for the missing lady? Where was Oregon last night and to-day? Why was he not one of the searchers? Where is he now?"

"He was as keen on the hunt as any, but fell into a trap that nearly caused his death, and from which he escaped but a short time ago. He is around somewhere, watching the proceedings, and I have no doubt will come forward at the proper time, to tell all he knows."

"Has any one seen this Oregon to-day?"

Billy looked around at the crowd as he spoke,

and it seemed to Neville that there was disbelief in his tone.

"Devan—the last man on guard over me—can tell you that he was with me but a few moments ago, and promised to be back at the trial."

"That's so," said Devan, nodding his head. "Ef yer wanted him he was there, and he didn't look much like running away."

Jimmy Bower was not about, or he could have corroborated the statement and given a point or two in addition. Billy, however, had no doubt of its truth.

"Here, half a dozen of you—no more—search the house and hustle him up if you find him. If Saul could get his eyes on him perhaps he could recognize him, sure enough."

"One moment, judge," interposed Saul.

"Mebbe Mister Oregon is into this game, an' mebbe he isn't; but he warn't one of the gang I seen. That I'll swar to. I'd know him a mile; an' he warn't thar."

"That's your say-so; but there's some one else to talk. Hunt him up, boys, but don't hurt him. We need him, bad."

The detail moved forward, and was about to enter the house, when some one came out with the force of a body hurled from a catapult. The men fell to this side and that, and a couple of them stumbled against the judge's chair, leaving the cause of the trouble doubled up in a central heap on the porch and fairly lined by the muzzle of Billy's revolver. If the saloon proprietor had not, while his arm was going up, recognized Jimmy Bower, the latter gentleman would have probably gone out of the world as unceremoniously as he had entered the presence of the court.

Every one looked anxiously at the doorway, expecting that there was more to follow, the Committee of Search gathering itself up, and the judge continuing to hold his revolver in readiness.

Jimmy appeared to be the most thoroughly bewildered of all. He stared at Neville North as though he was looking at a ghost, and scarcely heard Billy when he spoke:

"Say, Bower, it's reported that you know the whereabouts of the man known as Oregon. How is it?"

"He—he's in thar now!" exclaimed Jimmy, spluttering wildly in his eagerness to speak.

"Dog-gone my cats, if this don't beat the Jews! If this are him, who in thunder are ther other galoot? Hyar. Ther's somethin' wrong! Some ov you men come along an' help me ter bring 'em forra'ds. It'll jist knock this court blind."

"I guess you've been hitting the jug rather harder than the law allows," answered Billy. "Just explain what's the matter, and what you mean by coming out that way, head-first. This crowd's not in the humor for much foolishness, and it's a wonder you weren't knocked endways as a starter."

"But I tell yer he's in thar. Got ther drop on me when I didn't see him, an' war a goin' ter shoot when I did. If Oregon hadn't a-went fur him I wouldn't a-bin hyer now."

"What? Who? No more nonsense, or I'll go for you now."

"Ther other North. Thar! Don't you hear 'em? They'll git away. Didn't I tell yer so?"

He held up his hand warningly.

The conversation had caused a hush. From somewhere within the house came the muffled sounds of two pistol-shots.

It was like shaking a red rag before a mad bull. The crowd, so to speak, shut its eyes and made a rush before which barriers disappeared, and judge, jury, and escort to the prisoner were swept away. Before Jimmy had time to raise an objection, his house was packed with uninvited guests, who ravened through it from one end to the other.

They found nothing.

Oregon was gone, and the other North—if such a person there was—had disappeared along with him.

Or had Jimmy been making his story all up out of the whole cloth?

Some such suspicion as that caused a rush to be made once more, and this time in hunt of Bower. A few of the energetic ones were searching in the rear of the house, and a few were going over the inside more carefully; but the greater part of the crowd, heading for the front, met the landlord, vainly trying to make his way in, and forced him out into the open air.

It is dangerous work trifling with a mob.

"What sorter a yarn's this you bin givin' us?" growled the nearest man—Bull Dog Ben—as he twisted his hand in Jimmy's collar.

"Thar's no sign of ther Sport with a Scar—an' I'd give a hundred ter find him—ter stand with him, face ter face."

"He war thar!" puffed Jimmy. "I war lookin' fur him, when I struck ther other in this one's room. I'd bev bin a dead man but fur him. Ef they ain't thar they've skipped ther camp, one runnin' an' ther other follerin'. I begin ter b'lieve thar's bin a big mistake."

"Mistake notbin! Ef we find him he climbs a tree; but you're too bad scared ter tell ther truth ef yer wanted. Take us whar yer left

him. He held over me last night, curse him! but ef I meet him ag'in I'll show ther hand ter take ther money. An' ef you bin a-lyin'—look out! Ther man ez plays Brace Box fur flats 'll never want ter say his prayers but once more. Make way thar! Jimmy 'll show us whar ter look."

For a moment Bull Dog Ben, his hand still clutching the landlord, stood to one side of the door, while the stream, that otherwise would have blocked the way, poured out.

Then, as he turned to re-enter, he heard a cry of surprise.

He had been too excited to notice himself, but this sound called his eyes straight to where Neville North had stood when last he saw him.

There was no one there now.

His voice arose with dozens of others in a howl of rage, and he flourished his revolvers as he sprang to the edge of the porch.

"Rescue! Rescue!" he shouted. "Whar's ther men that helped him away? They're part ov his Gang. Scatter out an' shoot, boys! Ef we can't have ther rope, we'll try cold steel!"

"Go slow, you fool!" muttered a voice in his ear.

"The boys have him, and the boys will keep him. They stole him away in the racket, and took him down to the big oak. They'll whip the life out of him if he don't tell who his pards are. Whool I don't want to see it."

CHAPTER XXIX.

COLONEL KILLER'S NERVE.

NEVILLE NORTH had passed from the frying-pan to the fire.

The court wanted to see everything done decently and in order; but now he had fallen into hands that wanted things done, and cared very little about decency or order.

The move was made without any preconcerted plan of action, and apparently by chance.

When Jimmy came dashing out, he threw everything into confusion. Those on the outside of the semicircle heard little, and were not well pleased with what they did hear. It seemed as though there was a bit of underhanded work going on; and they were ready to stop it at any price.

"What's ther use ter bother 'bout outsiders?" asked one man. "This hyer one we hev, an' were sure he's guilty; why don't they hang him first, an' then go on with their side-shows? Pass him out! Whar's a rope? Are they goin' ter let him git away? Ther blamed, bloody, woman-killer!"

Such cries coming from one and another, were warming the crowd up. When a vacuum was created in front, the mass lately in the rear surged forward, the majority coming to kill if they got the chance.

The pistol-shots inside the house had interested Billy, the guards, and the prisoner himself. Before the latter knew what was on foot he was swept off the porch, away from judge and escort, and was being marched straight to the outskirts of the town. Behind were left a few soreheaded men who had vainly striven to oppose the voice of the people.

"Take it easy, gentlemen," said Neville, when he found breath and a chance to speak.

"We may as well go along with some comfort to all of us. Ther's no hurry. You won't do anything until the crowd all arrives, and there are plenty of stragglers already. You needn't be alarmed about losing your prey. Ther's no one that will care to interfere when your work is once begun."

"He's a cool one," said the man at his right shoulder; while the man at his left called to those in front to slacken their gait a little.

There was a rope around North's neck, and half a dozen were at the other end. They had not been stepping sedately, and the two that clutched him, one on either side, had been helping to drag the prisoner along until they were well nigh breathless.

The distance from Jimmy's to the big oak was not great, and the court that assembled there now was a good deal more to be feared than the one left behind. Neville saw no hope of escape now. These men had made up their minds, and did not intend to allow an opportunity for them to be altered.

"Now, then, pards!" exclaimed a burly miner, looking over the crowd. "I don't guess thar's a man hyer ez thinks he ain't guilty. Ef thar be let him shout out, an' say his reasons. Be quick, for we ain't waitin' too long."

Not a voice was raised. If there had been any doubters they had not come with this crowd. The fact was, it was understood it would not be a healthy place for them.

"That's right then. We're all agreed on that. Hangin's too good for him. But it won't do to forget ther's more of 'em in the bushes. Mebbe it's this man, an' mebbe it's that, but we want to know who they are, and all about it. A feller that kin talk an' won't talk, kin be made ter talk. Them ez wants ter know how they killed ther gal, an' who kerried her to Blindman's Shaft, jist say so."

A general howl of affirmatives answered the question.

"You hear 'em?" asked the miner, turning to Neville.

"Ov course it's a dance on air at ther end; but, thar's room ter be mighty uncomfortable afore that time comes. Thar won't be no foolin', er chin-chin. Are yer ready ter make a clean breast; er shall we put on ther patent extractors, an' git ther truth anyhow?"

"Gentlemen, I know as little as you do about the affair. All I can do is to say this, and throw myself upon the mercy of the court, unless you are willing to wait until my witnesses can be found, and the whole thing investigated. I swear to you, gentlemen, that I never harmed my cousin in deed or even thought, and—"

"That's enough! He's had his chance; now we'll take ours. Bring out the sticks an' trice him up. I've seen the fire and brimstone taken out of just such larkies in my time, already."

Neville North grew white—and no blame to him. He had submitted to the inquisition of a court of Brace Box's citizens; but if he had the chance he would have fallen into such hands alive.

It was too late for resistance now; but he could at least meet his fate with coolness, well as he realized its horrible nature.

He turned to the self-constituted leader.

Some one had hastily started a little fire, and the glow illuminated the faces of the two men, so that their eyes could meet.

"I have not yet said one word against an investigation of my guilt or innocence; I do protest against this brutality to a man to whom you have given no chance at all to prove either. There's sometimes a slip on a sure thing, and I give you warning. If I ever have the chance I will shoot you like a dog, and without warning."

"Look out, Jack, the kid begins to kick!"

The crowd kept quiet long enough to hear the savage threat; and then, casting that bit of ribaldry at the man who had winced in spite of himself at Neville's declaration, they pressed forward.

"Off with his coat, and up with him to the tree! We'll hear another kind of a song by the time the blood begins to run!"

North had a new experience then. He had never realized before how easily a dozen strong men, ablaze with excitement, could handle him. Before he had even thought of resistance the coat was torn from his back, a rope was knotted to his wrists and he was anchored against the tree, his hands drawn high above his head.

"Now, pris'ner, here's your last chance. You hang anyhow; but if you make a clean breast we turn you off as easy as we can. If you don't, we tuck on the gad. What's your answer?"

"I have already told the court all I know about the affair, and can say no more. Do your worst."

It was something of a surprise to hear this young tenderfoot talk so firmly; but it never staggered the settled belief of the majority of those there.

"That settles it. When you get ready to talk sing out. Stand a little back there, boys, and give room fer the work."

The crowd that had taken its look, hungry, cruel, ravenous look that it was, opened the circle a little, and two men stepped forward with the whips in their hands—long, tough rods, that could beat, and cut, and bruise, all at once.

"Now!"

At the signal the rods raised high in the air—and remained suspended. Along the road at breakneck speed came a horseman.

If he had shouted he would have made less impression. Since he silently devoted all his energies to getting there he must have a good reason for his coming.

It was only one man. There was nothing behind him, and he was riding into a mob small but select, that cared very little for human life, and whose members were never very careful of their own.

As he dashed up he leaned forward in his saddle, staring at the figure half suspended from the tree.

Then his horse halted at the end of a bound, and the man, with a great leap, swung himself into the heart of the crowd.

"Gentlemen!" he said, not raising his voice above an ordinary tone. "This thing has gone far enough. Just let this gentleman down, toss him his coat, and then continue your stroll. I don't remember that I have any further use for you."

At the sound of his words the rods dropped promptly, and if Neville was not cast loose it was because the rope was securely knotted, and no one was paying any attention to him.

The most remarkable thing was that not a man drew a weapon, though a moment before the crowd seemed ready to fight to the death rather than lose its prey.

"It's Kunnel Killer!" was the exclamation of those furthest from him. Those nearer—all but one—looked and said nothing. It was too uncertain what he was going to do.

Jack Miller was the only man who did not shrink back as those flashing eyes swept around the circle, and Jack, though he had been taking so prominent a part in the lynching, was com-

paratively a new-comer. He had never seen "the Killer" at work, and he did not like to give up his game.

"See here, colonel, I guess you're not going ter buck ag'in' ther bull camp. He's ther low-livered galoot that killed ther purtiest bit of calico ever seen in Brace Box. We war goin' ter try ter find out his pards. If it makes yer sick we'll leave that part out; but he's got ter climb ther tree, with a rope helpin'. We wouldn't take water even that far fur any other man livin'. Ain't that all straight, boys? Speak up!"

Rollins was not a large man; but for a moment Jack Miller did not doubt that he weighed a ton. It was only a leap and a blow straight from the shoulder, but they came so quickly, and so close together, that before any one had more than time to suspect what was coming, Miller lay senseless on the broad of his back, his fingers dropping away from the pistol-butt they had been clutching.

"Now, then, are you going to take that gentleman down, or are we to have trouble over it? I don't want to have to talk with the bark on; but in a case like this, if you won't listen to reason I'll have to do it. The young man may be a tenderfoot and a fool, but he's innocent as a lamb, and somebody has been roping you in to do their dirty work. I know what I'm talking of, and I don't want to have to explain further."

While the colonel talked, some one—the crowd in general did not see who, and who would not have objected if they had—cut the rope at Neville's wrists.

The young man reeled as the cords dropped away. The reaction was strong, but he managed to keep his wits about him.

"Thank you for that, Colonel Rollins. The proof of my innocence was just developing at the lynch court, to which I was submitting my case without a murmur. These men stole me away, and if they're not in contempt of court some of them ought to be. I am perfectly willing to go back and have the trial continue. Sooner or later my innocence will appear, clear as the noonday sun."

"That's all right," responded Killer.

"You've said your little speech now, and the gentlemen here understand the situation. Anything further that you may have to say to me you can tell quietly as we go along. We'll go back to Brace Box now, and if these gentlemen wish, they can go along and see the upshot. If they're not satisfied, then I'll be happy to talk it over with any one of them, or all of them."

He made a sweeping gesture toward the crowd, and then coolly tucking Neville's arm under his own, set out toward the central part of the town. The horse that he had ridden seemed to understand the matter, and followed sedately close in their rear.

"Heavens, man!" exclaimed Neville, under his breath.

"Are you not afraid they will shoot you from behind?"

"Wonderfully afraid they may try it, but it don't do to let the curs know. They know I always kill the man that begins the racket, and that makes them modest about opening the ball. If I hadn't been fooled out of town this could not have happened. I guess Charley Coldcard will say the same when he gets back."

"But the guilty parties—will they escape? I swear the murder of Viola shall be avenged!"

"Oh, it's two to nothing she's not dead at all. When we get your case disposed of, we'll soon find her."

CHAPTER XXX.

"IF ONE WAY WON'T DO, ANOTHER WILL."

If there was an unseen hand manipulating public opinion against Neville North, its work had certainly been done well. Colonel Rollins barely arrived in time to save the young man; while the two other "chiefs" were out of the affair altogether.

The trial was not over, though the drift of public opinion—among those who had remained at Jimmy's—was veering around in favor of the prisoner.

Jimmy Bower had seen Neville's double under circumstances rendering it impossible for him to be mistaken.

Jimmy admitted that he had been prejudiced against the prisoner because he put on airs; and stuck to the story of his having found the double prowling in North's rooms, and of Oregon having come to his rescue. He believed that the other North had made his escape, and the sport had followed in pursuit.

This was all very well in itself, but meantime Neville was in the hands of men who were not concerning themselves about his guilt or innocence. He would have been dead by the time his innocence was firmly established if it had not been for Colonel Rollins.

The absence of the colonel had been commented on and explained by several men who had seen him start out on horseback that morning, bound for Cactus Fork.

A man from the East was there, waiting to buy out the "Oriental"—one of the bits of mining property in which Rollins was interested. The colonel had no reason to doubt the genuineness of the letter, as he had been in corres-

pondence with the person signing himself J. Headly; and had set out in good faith.

Most any other man, when he found that J. Headly was not there, and had never been heard of before, would have camped for the balance of the day, and the night, in the best hotel in town. Instead of that the colonel spent half an hour in investigation, and then headed right back for Brace Box. He was a man of instincts, and his instincts told him there was something wrong.

He made the quickest run on record over the mountains, and got back just in time. There was still a great crowd left at Jimmy's, and the subject under discussion was whether to hunt for the missing prisoner, or let the self-appointed committee that appeared to have him in charge finish the business. After all, it was just as likely as not that he was guilty.

Killer digested the story in a moment, and formed his own conclusion.

"Gentlemen, the man is innocent. There's a game up somewhere. If he had been guilty, they wouldn't have taken the trouble to fool me out of town. You can settle it among yourselves; but I'll go and hunt him up."

No one else in camp would have cared to undertake that task single-handed; and it was not so sure that it would be an easy one for him. There was every prospect of his meeting with a warm reception. Curiosity to see how it would be, gave him a strong following—at a distance.

He had Neville safe and half-way back to Jimmy's before the advance guard was met. They turned, and the crowd increasing as they went, Neville's return was a good deal like a triumphal march. Since the movement had failed of its object, the effort at lynching proved to his advantage. Everybody was willing to listen, and even Billy waved his dignity and doffed his hat when the colonel took the floor, and got through his say-so as briefly as possible.

"Gentlemen!" said Rollins, "we haven't reached the bottom of this matter by any means, though you may not believe what I think. I am sure I was tricked out of town to prevent my taking a hand in this game. That satisfies me that things were not what they seemed. I think pretty much all of you can see it now. If this prisoner is innocent—as I think he can show if he has a little time—he ought to be hunting around for the missing young lady. I propose that he be turned loose. I will guarantee his appearance if there is ever a call for him again to answer to the charge. If I am not good enough for that, don't be afraid to speak. I'll be willing to argue the question with the best man left in Brace Box."

"The court accepts the recognizance, and stands adjourned," said Billy, with a courtly wave of his hand; and Rollins, who began to take an interest in the case, hurried Neville away to his room, leaving the crowd to argue whether the body of Viola North was in Blindman's Shaft, or whether they had been deceived by a deeply-laid plan. If the latter—well, there were a great many men in Brace Box who would go a good deal further to get even for such an affront than they would to serve the cause of simple justice.

"Now, young man!" said Rollins, when he and Neville were alone together.

"I presume you are on the square, and if so you want all the help you can get to straighten out the tangle. If I hadn't slept quite so hard last night, getting ready for my ride to-day, I might have heard something of this racket in time. There have been a good many hours lost; but if the young lady was taken away unharmed, the chances are that she is safe yet, and we can get her out of danger before the ruffians know who's taken hold of the tow-rope. I've heard something of the story; but let me know all about it. Who do you suspect?—I understand you have some ideas. And there was something said about a letter. If you want me in with you, tell the whole truth, and I'll see what I can do."

While he spoke the colonel was eying Neville in a way that would have made him very uncomfortable if he had anything to conceal.

The inspection seemed to prove satisfactory, however, and he closed with the promise that meant a good deal when given by the "Killer."

"I'm a little shaken up," said Neville, wiping his forehead.

"It seems to me that I can feel the accursed rope on my throat now. I didn't realize my danger till it was over. I didn't think I could be so broken up without having received any actual bodily harm. I'll talk to you as straight as I can, and if I don't get it right the first time, I'll go back and start fresh."

"Take your time to it," said Rollins with a smile.

"I know how it is myself. I twice came near stretching a rope when I was young; and was just as innocent as you are. That served as a lesson. After that I always let the other man get far enough advanced to take me clear of the courts, and then went for him with all that I had. Unless a man is naturally quarrelsome, after he gets a record he don't have much trouble. They would hardly have tried such a court on me."

North went over his story without hesitation.

Several times before it had been received with unbelief; but the colonel heard it without question to the end.

"You have confidence in this Oregon of course?"

"Certainly."

"And this young lady, who has been masquerading around in your interest—what has become of her?"

"Unfortunately, Oregon did not explain, though he must know. He only said they had held him in a box all day, and tried to kill her. How nearly they succeeded he did not let me know, or how he knew, or where she was."

"Where was she going when she left you? It may be that in hunting for her we would strike the trail of your cousin."

"Perhaps. But what has become of Ryan, and his friends? It seems so strange that half a dozen persons should disappear without there being anything to indicate which way they went. I know as well as I know anything that Viola is in Cyril's hands; but is it possible he has the rest? And how does it come that, knowing Brace Box as well as he does, no one there seems to know him?"

Killer rubbed his chin thoughtfully and took time to consider before he answered.

"Names don't go for much here; it's the men themselves that we want to know. Like as not he's been in town often enough, and I may have been seated on the other side of the table from him more than once. But the man that has been running this affair is a good man—just about as good as the best—and it seems strange that I can't think of one that would fill the bill. Coldcard has nerve enough, but he's not that kind; and Solid Sam is not much for headwork, and is honest as they make 'em. You say he looks like you?"

"He seems to, when he has his fixings on, though we never noticed it much years ago."

"I don't remember him, and I'm pretty well acquainted in these parts, too. I suspect there is one man who could talk if he wanted, though I am sure that he won't. I mean Billy who runs the Bower. It was cheeky in putting him up as Judge Lynch after what had happened to you in his house; but I suppose he was the best material they had. The fellow's not afraid of you, for he don't know the meaning of the word, but he would a little sooner than not see you out of the road, without being too particular how you went. I wouldn't stop much to get up a gang and raid his house. The boys would follow me, and we might find out something."

"You might find a trap-door, but even that is uncertain. Billy swore that if I didn't crawl out myself I was smuggled out by the door, while everybody was thinking about the gas-fixtures. I hardly know what to think. With the business he has one would think he would not fancy trying on such a risky game."

"Unless he was about ready to close up that business. We'll look through his place quietly if we can, and the cellar they had you in. We may find sign. But I suspect no one, unless it is Sam, who has gone far enough. I should foot it up something like this."

He ceased speaking suddenly, and glared at the window, his hand darting around to his pistol-pocket and then rising in line, just as there was a jingle of breaking glass. There was a double report. Colonel Rollins fell back, the blood on the instant beginning to crimson his face; and then came a second shot, that whistled close to Neville North's head, while he heard a scuffling sound and an exclamation without.

It was no time to look after the wounded. The attack was aimed at him, and Neville did not hesitate to meet it.

He caught up Rollins's pistol, and rushed to the window, throwing up the sash. Right below there was a little heap doubled up on the ground, and half a dozen persons were running toward the spot to see what was the meaning of the shot, though at another time the noise would not have attracted attention. Beyond this he could see nothing; and the little heap turned out to be Merry May.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NUMBER EIGHT LEADS A PROCESSION.

As Viola did not change her mind within the hour, she saw no more of Cyril for the night.

The woman who brought her meals was fully equal to the description given of her, and after one glance Viola was satisfied. She scarcely looked at her again, and spent the remaining hours of daylight in meditation.

It was hard to believe that Neville was in such danger as his cousin averred; but even if he was, she said to herself a hundred times, he should not be saved by any such sacrifice of herself as Cyril had claimed.

If she had seen any way to deceive Cyril, she would not have hesitated; but when she had spent an hour or more trying to form some plan she remembered that it was too late. After that, if no opportunity to escape presented itself, there was nothing to do but wait.

No such chance did turn up, and as she had exhausted herself thinking by daylight, by night Viola slept. She was still sleeping when, just about daybreak, Cyril North came dashing into camp, threw himself from his horse, and after a

word or two to his lieutenant, made his way to the cabin.

The door opened quietly, but the slight noise awakened the prisoner, who started to a sitting posture, and stared at the intruder, not at once realizing where she was.

"Don't be excited, fair cousin. It is only your devoted admirer, Cyril. I found it necessary to return sooner than I expected, and of course looked in on you first thing. All comfortable, eh?"

"This looks like comfort," she answered, bitterly, with a wave of the hand to take in the surroundings.

"And I had forgotten everything for the time. I should have known that you would not even let me sleep my sleep out. What is it? Why have you brought me back to life before my time?"

"Sorry I am to disturb you; but the gang is about to change its headquarters; and you will have to move with it. I expect we'll have a whole menagerie with us before the day is over; and these quarters are entirely too contracted."

"Ha! Then they are on your trail, and sooner or later you will be brought to bay. I might have known your wickedness could not prosper. Neville was harder to kill than you thought for."

"He has the luck of a cat—you see I'm always telling the truth to you. If the young man was ever worse scared it was not because he was in more danger. When Long Ebe flourished a lock of your hair that he said had been found in Blindman's Shaft the crowd was so bloodthirsty they couldn't raise a yell. A select committee dragged him right away with a rope around his neck. They intended to beat the truth out of him first, and had their sticks actually in the air."

Cyril paused, and looked maliciously at the young girl.

"And you stopped them?" she said. "Surely you would not let such a brutal crime be done, when a word from you would stay it?"

"And legislate my own back under the rod? Thank you. I never give myself away after that fashion. The trouble was, I was not there. If I had been, the punishment would have gone on until Master Neville found his tongue. I'd have tried a snapshot on the one man in Brace Box that dared to face such a mob. Curse them all for cowards! He backed them down for school children; and walked away with the prisoner as though he had the power of life and death at his finger ends. But I think I got even—though even that was mistake. I pulled first on the wrong man. When he went down and I aimed at the other a little fool had to be there to throw up my hand. I knocked him down with the one hand and shot with the other, but had no time to see where the lead went to. I don't think it was altogether wasted."

"And you can tell me all this, when a whisper of it would stretch your neck? You must be crime mad."

"I want to let you know exactly what sort of a man you are dealing with, though I have long had an idea that you suspected. You did not really suppose that I was such an innocent as to believe that you were taking all this trouble simply to hand me our aunt's fortune. Come! Tell me the truth if you dare; and then say that you do not deserve all that you get—and more."

"I came to see that justice was done. You know as well as I what that means."

"Probably that Oregon is a United States marshal, or a detective; and had a warrant in his pocket for my arrest. Would it have been any wonder if I had killed you all three on sight? And yet, if he had known who I really was, he would have torn your paper to pieces, and gone into the game on his own account. He's not the kind to send to court the man he wants to kill. He will not be apt to trouble any of us again."

"And now, no doubt, you intend to kill me, too?"

Viola looked up at him with flashing eyes, measuring the distance between them. There was a meaning in her glance that Cyril caught, and involuntarily he threw his hand to a revolver and stepped back a pace.

Then he laughed shortly.

"And now, I do not intend to do anything of the kind, I can't leave my friends until we have a final settlement with Brace Box—or such part of it as desires to take a further interest in our affairs. After that we will take our wedding tour, bringing up at New York, reduce our aunt's fortune to possession, and be ready for what comes next. Blissful prospect! Glorious future, shared with thee! We'll separate a while and dream over it. But if I never come back, then you will die."

"He went away without offering Viola an opportunity to reply though to his sneering rhapsody she had nothing to say. Only as he walked it seemed to her that his step was a little less jaunty than usual, and even that he staggered slightly as he stepped.

The woman who served as turnkey went with him, and they held a short, whispered conference outside.

Presently breakfast came, and after that, there was a little bustle in camp. The out-

laws moved out in a body, save a couple who served as guards. There was a chance, perhaps, after all. When they moved in that manner, it meant that they expected to meet either foes or victims; and if they never came back, it would not be strange. Some day there would come such an ending to Gadley's Gang. The country must certainly grow too hot to hold it. And yet, in that case, what fate had he prepared for her? To Viola, Cyril never lied.

In about an hour, two of the outlaws came hurrying back. They only lingered long enough to say a few words to the guards, and then made their way directly to the cabin on the ledge.

"Beg yer pardon, marm. Ther captain sent me ez bein' somewhat acquainted. You know 'bout my style. Smooth ez silk ef you treat me purty, but thar all ther time. I guess ther'll be no nonsense. Ther boss said you knowed what become of Number Six. He didn't foller orders; I will. Git ready. Ye'r goin' somewhar."

There was scant time for questioning; and none at all was needed for getting ready. She followed Number Eight without a word.

Once off of the ledge, and safely in the valley, the outlaw took a precaution that hardly seemed needful.

He carefully knotted Viola's wrists together, and then, tossing her on the back of a saddle-borse, fastened her to the pommel.

"Ef it war any one else, I'd blind yer eyes; but ther boss didn't say nothin', an' I don't guess he counts on comin' back hyer. It's a fool game, but he pays his money and kin have his fun. But don't try any ground an' lofty tumblin'. You'll break yer purty little neck, sure."

With this final caution; Number Eight led the way. He had a leading line attached to Viola's horse; and behind her the other outlaw followed closely.

They went up the valley—Captain Gadley had led his men down—and the prisoner could see that they were taking her further away into the recesses of the mountains. Discerning this much, she felt certain that Cyril knew of some movement for her rescue, and had gone forward to check it, while removing her further out of its way.

It was a wearisome journey that followed, and one that she would have dreaded to take alone, even to save her life. The sure-footed animal under her went along the tortuous, dangerous path without hesitation or stumble, but more than once she held her breath as they trod on the merest thread of a path, that hung against the side of a precipice.

And at nearly every one of these difficult places, they had turned aside from what seemed to be the truer path, and left no trail to show they had done so.

Number Eight glanced back from time to time with an approving nod, but held his peace. The coolness that she showed had its effect, but he knew that it would do her nerves no good to speak of it until the danger was past.

When, however, they came to a ledge that seemed to be near the crest of the range, and yet led easily down into a pleasant nook, the man had his say.

"It's not every man the boss would trust ter go over that trail, an' I didn't believe a woman could do it. Blessed ef I didn't think he wanted you ter drop. He knowed yer nerve better than I did, an' that's a fact. We'll camp hyer fur a bit, an' see how things pan out."

He removed the cord from her wrists, and helped her to dismount, then led the way toward a hitberto unseen opening in the rocks.

"Handle me with care," said Viola, looking at him firmly.

"Your captain's arm is long, and he would take fearful vengeance ef anything happened to me."

"He might, an' then ag'in he mightn't. I ain't so sure he's ez badly mashed ez you think fur; an' I know, ef things take a whirl 'round, I've got orders. Ter tell ther gospel truth, I don't see whar you come in at, nobow."

"We will not discuss that for the present. Dare you tell me, without transgressing your orders, whither your captain has gone now?"

"I can't see ez it kin do any harm fur you ter know it, an' fer me ter tell it. He's gone ter have a shot at Brace Box. A bull army are on ther road, an' he means fer make 'em jest too sick."

"Would he dare to be so reckless?"

"What he says goes with ther boys, an' that's what he talks. But hyer's yer campin'-ground fur ther present. It's easier ter keep track ov yer in hyer, an' ther boss—ef he's comin'—won't be 'round fur a few hours. We'll be right outside, takin' keer ov you. We'd climb a rope like Number Six if we didn't. So-long."

Again Viola was left alone to wait.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. MORRISON GIVES HER GAME AWAY.

CYRIL made no mistake about there being a little army on the move from Brace Box. He had done enough to turn the town inside out, if its citizens had been like some communities. A good many of the kind that usually get to the

front in such expeditions were out of conceit with Colonel Rollins just now; and others felt that if they had no business engagements at home they would like to have. Still, there were men who thought it was about time that something was done with Captain Gadley and his Gang, and were ready to act accordingly, and these were the men Neville hit.

Neville North had just had a lesson, and no one could accuse him of apathy under this last attack.

He did not at once recognize the form under the window as belonging to Merry May, but he sprung out, and raised her from the ground.

"Look out for a man with two barrels empty!" he exclaimed, to those that came dashing up.

"He's killed Rollins, and left his mark here, though I think it was at me the villain fired. Some of you spread out and look for him. Is there a doctor here, or near? If so, send him to the front."

"If Killer's hurt we'll have Doc Borden 'round in no time. The old coon wouldn't come for anybody else. Slim Jim has gone for him now. But who's the kid; and where does he come in at?"

"Heavens!" said Neville, looking closer at the figure on his arm. "It is Merry May!"

It was but a few steps to the door, but some of the crowd went in through the window. Neville preferred to take his burden by the appropriate route, though by this time he knew it was a living being he was carrying straight to her room.

"Let me down and prop me up somewhere," she whispered.

"I'm all right, and don't want to make a show of myself. The villain hit hard; but I've got a tough little head of my own, and I'll live to get even yet. Go in and see what's the matter with Rollins. I'll be around shortly."

"If you really don't need any help?"

"Not a bit—now. I want to pull my wits together. I've just got away from the Gang, and will have a strange story to tell. Go, before the mob takes a notion to look for you again."

There was no mistaking her earnestness; and her voice seemed to be getting stronger. North hurried away to Rollins. If she needed him, he could not leave a woman; but to Rollins he was indebted for his life, and he felt a strong interest in the nery pistol chief, who might be dead or dying on his account.

Doctor Borden's shanty was scarcely a stone's throw from the hotel, and the doctor came puffing in from his brief run just as Neville entered the room.

"Get out, you gentlemen; and a couple brutes can stay! Do you want to smother him? Here, give the old man a chance! Maybe it's not as bad as it looks."

Without any ceremony he cleared the room of all but two or three.

"Bad work! bad work!" he muttered, putting on his spectacles and looking the colonel over carefully.

"Forty-four caliber; bones smashed; blood lost; enough to kill an ordinary man. Humph! Blood in good condition; always in training; brain all right; guess he'll do. Bad shock, and only half an inch to go on. Don't think he'll die this time."

The owners of a row of anxious heads at the window gave a shout of satisfaction, and the doctor threw up both hands.

"Get out of this, or I'll begin to shoot myself! Do you want to yell him into his grave? Last time of asking! Go away from there or I'll pull; and any lynch court in Brace Box will say I served you right."

When Borden was not precisely sober he would just as soon as not be as good as his word, so that considering the chances of the doctor's being in his normal condition, his threat went for something. The head disappeared, and the doctor went on with his examination, his water dressing and his stimulants. In a little while the patient began to revive.

"You're something of a doctor yourself, eh?" said Borden, looking keenly at Neville.

"A little, but my experience with gunshot wounds has been limited."

"Fine place to enlarge it! There's nothing the matter with him now but a little hole. Take care of him. If you keep him quiet you can't go wrong. If he won't be quiet, and will talk send for me. I'll talk to him with a club. Good-night. I'm going home now; going to sleep. Must have it. See you all in the morning, if the earth don't crack. Wouldn't have come out for anybody else. Lot of these drunken hoodlums layin' fur me, and I'm going to make them do their shooting by daylight. Mad because I won't nurse 'em fur nothing, and pay my board bill to boot. Humph! I'm off! Of course they didn't find the shooter."

The shooter had made his escape good, without any one having obtained a glimpse of him, but Neville had no doubts as to who it was; and was just as sure that any pursuit that night would be in vain, so there was no temptation for him to leave the side of the colonel after Merry May came gliding into the room.

"Can I be of any use?" was her greeting, as North looked up.

"Not a bit, at present. He's doing well. After a little I can leave him in charge of Mr. Bower long enough to hear what you have to say."

"Say it here," whispered the colonel, with more life in him than they expected to find. "Keep Jimmy out now that he's gone. He'll talk me blind about his house and its reputation. It's been a headquarters confound 'em, for all the thugs and thieves of creation since he opened."

"See here, this won't do," interposed Neville. "The doctor said you must keep quiet."

"Quiet am I. You can do all the talking if you want to, but I must know who did the shooting, and what it was all about. I can guess the last, though."

"You can guess a little better how near you came to the top of my head if you look at my hat," answered the girl gambler, with a trifle of sternness.

"For the rest, it's a moderately long story, and I am not sure you will understand it, but I don't want any interruptions. I'll reel it off to a finish, and then you can have the floor, if you want it."

"Go ahead. I couldn't talk if I wanted, and I'll take it out in listening. Where have you been?"

The question was a fair starter, but Merry May answered it by another.

"First and foremost, did you ever have a side-partner by the name of Cyril North, or Walter Brunner?"

"Never."

"So I thought. She was trying to get us on the wrong scent. Well, my little history, cut down, reads about like this:

"Paul Morrison and his wife up the gulch, are helping Master Cyril play his hand. As Cyril is very much of a rascal, and always has been, they have a strong suspicion that it would not be altogether safe for him to go back East to take charge of the little fortune that our obliging friend here and his cousin are trying to shove into his hands. Indeed, they think the pretended philanthropy is a fraud, and Cyril seems to be frantically anxious to make things level. He wanted to hang our Neville and marry the charming Viola."

"And right there is where he got the fat in the fire. He was trying to keep the latter part to himself, and didn't succeed worth a cent. As a consequence, the lady up the gulch is furiously jealous, and has about made up her mind to kill them both, and go for the fortune as the deceased North's widow. As far as I see there's nothing to stop her."

"His widow? I thought you were talking about Paul Morrison's wife?"

Neville was growing strangely interested in the story.

"Paul don't count for much in the game. He's not her husband at all; and if I was giving a guess I'd say he wasn't any closer than a brother."

"They're bound to get Neville anyhow, and all of his backers. As they didn't want to buck against the colonel and Charley Colcard, they tried to send them out of town, while Solid Sam is cooped somewhere in the mountains."

"As, with my usual freshness, I had taken a hand in, the madam wanted to go for me as large as a wolf. And then I seemed to be a sort of inside friend of Oregon's, and was fool enough to show her a diamond that I won, a year or so ago, from Walter Brunner, as I knew him then; so, you see she had three very good reasons: and Walter had two."

"But what has Oregon specially to do with her?"

"That's chance, which beats luck and science every time. Oregon is the original husband."

"And where is he now?"

Neville had not intended to interrupt; but the questions would come.

"That's for them to find out and nobody else to know. They had him cooped, but turned him loose when they thought they had made every arrangement to have him hung along with our mutual friend. They had some special end to serve; but that didn't develop. Their Gang had their orders, but fortunately some of them got switched off on the chase of Oregon, through the hotel, and Killer bluffed the rest."

"To come back to myself; they managed to drug me up at Jimmy's, and then Chestnut roped me, as innocent as a yearling calf. I went up to Morrison's with both hands on my derringers, and then tumbled over right into Paul's arms. Ugh! I thought I was dead. And so did they, I guess, for they laid me back in a cuddly-hole, where I would be out of the road till they had more time to attend to me."

"We were all both three mistaken. I wasn't dead a bit, and only my body was sleeping. In course of time I could hear as well as anybody, if I could not move; and I heard the two talking over matters in the main room. I haven't told what I heard, exactly, but what I made out of it."

"I didn't hear as much about Chestnut Chink as I would have liked to, but I heard enough to know that he is an infernal rascal, and their man. If I understood them he'll be around, presently, to offer to lead the way to the place

where Viola and the rest are confined. A little this side of it Gadley's Gang falls upon us, we are routed, horse, foot and dragoons, a select few being taken prisoners, and put out of the world after the most convenient style possible."

"When they got this far I decided that I wasn't so sick nor so sleepy as I had been. I made a desperate effort; got one of the madam's whisky flasks, which I emptied; and then made my escape, arriving here just in time to save your life, young man. Now then, what are you going to do about it?"

"Going to the mountains to rescue Viola," sternly answered Neville. "I am only too sorry that the colonel will not be able to go along."

"Better wait for Chestnut; so that you'll know where you are going."

"That's so," interrupted a voice behind them, "an' I'll post yer whar ter look fur squalls while I run inter port by another tack."

They looked hastily in the direction of the voice, and saw Oregon, who had entered unperceived.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TIGER TURNS.

CHESTNUT CHINK's story was a marvelous creation not to be true; and Neville seemed to swallow it like spring water. Chink too had overheard a conversation, and had come right away to retail it where it would do the most good.

Cyril North, assisted by two men had abducted Viola and had her hidden in a cave in the Chico Rico Mountain. Viola was nearly dead from fright and mountain fever, and Cyril had come for Paul Morrison and his wife to nurse her. Chestnut had suspected these two, and had been keeping an eye on them. They had all set out for the mountains, but, if it was true about their destination being the cave, they might be followed. Long Ebe and several other mountain men were in camp, and could find the spot. Half a dozen men and Neville could do the rest.

"I am inclined to trust you, Mr. Chink," was Neville's answer, "because Oregon, in whom I put every confidence, seemed to think you were a vast deal better than your looks or your reputation. If this turns out to be correct information I will give you a thousand dollars. If you attempt to deceive me, I will kill you. Those terms are acceptable, I suppose."

"Ef yer dead sure you can't do better. It's a heap big thing, this I've lit on, an' orter be ther biggest strike of my life."

Under the circumstances, Chink was willing to ask the earth.

"Why, confound you! Oregon is certainly on the trail by this time; and Merry May would surely have turned up before this if she had not hit on some trace of my missing cousin. I can save a thousand, and you get nothing."

"Mebbe. But you're ther doctor; take it ez you want it. Ef ther young lady gits through all right she'll do ther squar' thing, an' make it up to me. Ef ye'r goin' you kin git up a crowd ef you stand out thar an' shout; but you won't know who's who. Ef I war you I'd speak ter Jimmy, an' he'll tell yer who ter pick."

The suggestion was adopted; and Bower, in all honesty, recommended the men, and indorsed Chestnut's statement about Long Ebe.

Then, without letting Chink know anything about it, Cyril went back to Colonel Rollins, who was not too weak nor too feverish to give good advice.

"All correct except Ebe," said Rollins, as he heard the last name on the list.

"I don't know much about him, or anything against him; but as he showed himself to the front on the other side, in running down the blind trail, I simply wouldn't trust. If they expect to lead you into an ambush, he could help most wonderfully if you weren't posted. Don't let him get too far in front, or too far behind."

"In the future I don't think my confidence in human nature will kill me. Of course we expect to meet somebody long enough before we get to that cave which Chestnut pretends to have heard of; but if we do it won't be the worse for us; and meantime Oregon may have a chance to get in the rear."

"Good boy! take care of yourself!" was the Killer's parting advice; and Neville went away to hunt for his recruits.

He had less trouble in finding them than he had feared. The excitement had pretty generally calmed down, and the most of the men he wanted were in bed, or just getting their breakfasts. Very quietly he gathered them up, and those that wouldn't go for love went for money. The day had not advanced very far when the party quietly stole out of town; having Long Ebe along for guide, and Chestnut Chink for general utility. The latter seemed to be rising above his general average, on the strength of the important information he had furnished, for the time forgetting his fables, and even omitting his favorite giggle.

When they were fairly on the road Long Ebe called a halt. He addressed Neville; though he was just as evidently talking for the benefit of the rest.

"Jest a word, boss. You're a new hand hyerabouts, an' mebbe you don't jest know how things run about Brace Box. Ef things are ez Chink thar tells 'em, I kin put this through, under orders, an' we'll all be back an' smilin' to-morrer. But thar's jest a chance we'll stir up a ho'nets' nest. Thar's a man out thar ez calls hisself Captain Gadley, which hez a gang. About its bigness I ain't so sure; but they're all bad men. Ef we meet 'em, an' thar's a few ov 'em, we can take 'em into camp. But s'posin' this hyer man we're after is in with 'em, an' thar's quite a heap few ov 'em, this outfit ain't heavy enough to see you through. Er they may hev gobbled 'em up afore we git thar, an' stand us off ter make their own terms. Ef we meet 'em we kin feel 'em strong ter see how heavy they be; but ef he hez his hull army, then ther less shootin' an' ther more runnin' we do ther more ov us'll set down ter breakfast in ther mornin'. I ain't flunkin', mind yer; but I wants ter know, aforehand, ef we run ag'in' sich a snag how yer all expects ter take it?"

"If we meet the road-agents I am willing to deal with them on a money basis," answered Neville briefly. "With Cyril nothing of the kind can be done. In whatever way Viola is rescued it will be a little fortune for you men, and if Gadley would not listen to reason—though it's dollars and dimes he is after—I should not expect you to fight against an overwhelming force. When I fall back the rest will follow."

Some of the men looked serious, but Long Ebe's words did not seem to produce the effect that Neville feared. What one of them, Dave Dunn, said answered for them all.

"Cap, yer put down good wages fur a big reesk as a send-off; and there's a woman in the case. Besides, Gadley ain't got as big a crowd as some thinks. Why, he couldn't feed him! So, if it comes to a fight, you can count on us staying with you, and that's all that a man can ask. We know each other purty well; and I think I kin speak fur ther whole lot."

"That's what I war wantin' ter know," said Ebe. "We fight while thar's a chance, an' all stick tergether. Good enough! Hyer goes!"

Without waiting for further discussion he moved off, and Neville and his men silently followed.

North was glad of this explanation. He would have brought it about himself if it had not been for Chestnut Chink, whom, as yet, he did not fully understand. If it was part of the scheme for the young fellow to slip out on the route he could probably be prevented; but to provide for contingencies it was better that he should not know that his treachery was understood from the start.

The youth showed no signs of wanting to get away. The only suspicious thing in his actions was the earnestness with which he questioned Neville in regard to Merry May—though he explained that she had been mentioned in the conversation at Morrison's, and he understood that she was dead.

"Scarcely dead," answered Neville. "At least, I am very certain that she is with Oregon, and on the trail. It is possible that we may meet them both."

It was taking some risk, responding thus, for more than one had seen him staggering into the hotel with her in his arms. For a wonder Chink had heard nothing about it.

Dave Dunn seemed to be one of the most trustworthy of the men Neville had gathered together, and the latter took occasion to speak to him quietly.

Without mentioning his suspicions of either Chink or Long Ebe he hinted that he would look to him, Dunn, for aid and assistance. He said nothing about Oregon, but stated that he was not inclined to scut Long Ebe's warning, and that they should be on their guard against a surprise. From what he had been able to pick up about the country there were several places where an ambush might be expected. He didn't want to seem to give advice to men that knew all about such things, but he hoped they would go carefully, and ready for the worst; above all, not to fall into a panic if they met with an enemy more in force than they had been led to expect. It was possible that there might be a fire in the rear that would help them out when least expected. There were some good men on the trail, who had taken it to stay.

"That's all right, Pard North," was Dunn's deliberate answer.

"Ebe's heading straight for the Chico Rico—I've bin thar myself. It's a tough country to sodger over, and I guess ther road-agents are 'bout ther only men prospectin' thar nowdays. Mebbe we'll strike them, and mebbe you'll man; but whatever we meet and when, you'll find us ready. In broad daylight they can't get very far ahead of us. Rest easy. Old Ebe knows whar he's going."

Dunn spoke up very positively, and yet there was just where he was mistaken. Oregon had overlooked one portion of the trail. It was further from the haunt of Captain Gadley and the cave on the Chico Rico, and in appearance not so favorable for an ambushade as other spots further on.

Chestnut Chink and Long Ebe, side by side, were at the head of the party, and under easy

reach of their revolvers. Present danger was not thought of, and before they remembered or suspected its presence they were well into a dark and narrow defile.

Then up rose Captain Gadley and a dozen masked men, half to the one side, half to the other, hemming them in.

In his hands the captain held a Winchester, and without a word of warning he pointed it straight for Chestnut Chink and pulled the trigger.

There was not another there that the attack did not find unprepared; but Chestnut, the slow and timorous, was ready.

Quick as a cat, at the appearance of Captain Gadley, he leaned sideways, and his hands dropped upon Long Ebe's shoulders. A sudden wrench and he brought the trailer in front of him, just in time to receive the hissing bullet that would otherwise have taken his own life. Then, with a wild and peculiar cry, he dashed away down the gorge, while the outlaws again sunk out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SPRING OF CYRIL'S TRAP.

CHESTNUT was gone before Neville and his men had time to stop him. The plan to keep an eye on him was not a complete success, and its failure, at the time, seemed hardly to be regretted. Whether true or false to them, he had barely escaped with his life. There was no doubt that the ball was aimed at him; and if it struck Ebe, it was because Chink had pulled him in range.

A muttered curse dropped from Captain Gadley, as he threw up another cartridge.

"After him, two of you, and shoot him down if he attempts to escape. The cursed botch of his has cost us the life of a good man. And you infernal botches! How did you come to let him get away? The whole drove might as well have got through. Steady now! Keep them covered while I talk sense to 'em. No shooting till you get orders; but keep your guns ready at an aim."

Captain Gadley—or Cyril North, as the reader best knows him—got no answer to his conflicting words. His men handled their weapons to show they meant business, and glared down at the men in the pen below, peering carefully from their coverts, offering no mark for a shot, and yet ready to rise and pour in a volley the moment the order was given.

Cyril meantime acted with the recklessness that had always been his own. It was only for a moment that he had taken to cover. Then he stood up boldly, his left hand upheld, the palm to the front, while in his right hand he grasped his rifle.

"Ho, there, you below! You'll have a chance for all the shooting you want if you'll hold your horses a little. Just now there's a chance for a talk. I have you foul anyhow, so you'd be bigger fools than I think if you don't take it. What are you doing here on our play ground? Somebody come to the front, and speak up lively now. It's as much as I can do to keep the boys from shooting, and when they begin it will be hard to find a grass spot left of you."

"Perhaps; but you'll find that the shooting will not be all on one side," shouted back Neville, stepping a pace forward to assume the leadership that belonged to him. "We meet once more, face to face, Cyril North. You know well enough why we are here. Surrender or take the consequences."

"My dear boy, your consequences can't amount to much, otherwise; but if we surrendered they would pan out too heavy for any fun. You must see how it is yourself. Now, I've got a little to say to you, and your gang, since you are in the humor to listen. You've seen my men—and you didn't take a shot at them when you had the chance that we don't intend to give you again. Every one of them can drive center at at two hundred yards, and you're not near that far away now. Every one of them has a bead, though you can't see them. When their fingers pull, you all drop, too dead to kick. That's just the fix you're in. When I say hands up, if they don't come up there's nothing to stop from taking in the last soul in the outfit. I'm talking to you now—the rest are not tenderfeet, and they have been understanding the situation all along."

"Excuse me, pard!"

Dave Dunn spoke up. Everybody knew that having walked into the trap the words of the road-agent were the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The sudden fall of Long Ebe had produced a startling effect, and Dave, save Neville, was the coolest man there.

"That may all be true, but you've stepped a little too far forward. You can't dodge, and I'll fire at the flash if a man picks trigger. I've got you lined. Don't you stir, but quit putting on side. Let's talk this thing over. What in thunder do you want?"

"I want Neville North, there; and I expect to have him. I've no use for the rest of you riff-raff any more than I had for that cold meat that lies on the trail. If the fool in the bushes hadn't pulled him in the way he wouldn't have stopped a bullet, and there would have been no one hurt. You can pull out for Brace Box or

wherever you belong; but North I am going to have if I have to turn some sixty more toes up to the daisies. I am leaving this region anyhow, so that a little slaughter, more or less, won't harm me worth a cent. Besides that, I know your camp. All the men you could coax out here to hunt Captain Gadley wouldn't make a mouthful. There's about three solid men to think about, and the rest of the town ain't worth a cent. Man alive, you can't get out of the box. Name your vanity."

The two men grew, if anything, cooler as they talked. Dunn was crouching, his rifle at his shoulder, his left elbow resting on his knee. It looked as though he could hold the drop for a week. Partly covered, too, as he was, it would not be so easy to bring him down by a single shot. To fire and miss rendered the captain's death almost a certainty.

Cyril North stood with his arms folded. From the time he first spoke the sneer never left his lips. One would have said that he must feel himself absolutely bullet-proof. His men looked on as stoically as though they were so many machines, that would move only when he touched a spring. Captain Gadley was accustomed to have his orders obeyed when he gave any, and these men expected to do as he said even if they thought this game of nerve would result in the death of both men.

It was Neville who broke the deadlock.

"One moment, Dunn. You men have all stuck by me well enough, but luck is dead against us, and there is no need of a general sacrifice; when you all might escape, and it's not so certain that any harm will come to me. Once out of this trap, you can take care of yourselves. If yonder man allows you to retire, I will yield myself his prisoner. If he will not, we'll fight it out right here, if we never stir another foot. There's no need for a single word more except yes or no. How is it?"

"Good enough. If your men accept the capitulation, they can march out on those terms with drums beating and banners flying; only they had better go soon. And the next time they come to hunt me they want to keep their eyes very wide open. Take your dead along, too. I have no use for it here."

Dunn wavered.

The fact was he rather wanted to take a shot at the mountain outlaw, and would have been willing to run the risks for himself. In an undertone he muttered:

"You sure you mean it? We ain't dead yet, or even badly skered."

"I mean what I say, always. Be quick, before he thinks to go through your pockets. I have already paid you fair wages, and if I see you again I'll pay you more. Good-day. Find Oregon, if you can; he will arrange the rest."

Up in the air he held his hands, and marched down the ravine in the direction taken by Chestnut Chink in his flight.

After that there was little delay on the part of the men from Brace Box. They accepted the situation, and were off in a moment, not altogether certain they would not be shot in the back.

The one division of the outlaws kept them covered; the other, with their captain, followed after Neville.

"I fancy that I have you now, Master Neville," said Cyril, as he at last stood by the side of his cousin.

"If you had been sensible, you would have fought it out when there was at least the ghost of a chance. Of course you have none now. Up to this I have held my hand a little, till I could see how the cat jumped. I thought I might go East. Now I give that up, and get down to the business pure and simple of evening up old scores. Curse you! I've been yearning for your life every day since I left home; but I never thought I'd get that and the old lady's money to boot."

"My life you may take; but if you ever get our aunt's wealth, it will pass on to your heirs before you have time to carry it away. Before I left Brace Box, I sent a statement back of how we found you, and of what manner you were. When you advance to claim the fortune, you will see the noose hanging ready for your neck."

"Thanks for the warning; but I assure you I have no idea of running any such risks. My wife will attend to all that. I shall send her—the divine Viola—to claim it, and carry it away to some foreign clime where we may spend it together. Come back to us, Neville, come back to us in the spirit, and mark how happy we can be. Oh, if your ghost only could come, how the sight would make him wince. But, never mind. First, you shall dance at our wedding; then, you shall dance on the rope."

There was a savage hate in his words that made Neville shiver and say no more. As yet his nerve was unbroken, but it remained to be seen how he would endure what Captain Gadley had still in store for him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DOORS OPEN AT SEVEN.

CYRIL had his cousins at his mercy, and, for the present, Brace Box was disposed of. He did not revisit the camping-ground of the preceding night; but gained the vicinity of the

cave to which Viola had been transferred by a more direct, though fully as dangerous a route. Of course he was far enough away from the known cave on the Chico Rico.

After the fierce outbreak immediately upon Neville's capture, the outlaw said no more to him, and when, at the end of the long journey the halt came, the captive knew not whether he was near Viola or not.

Neville was also curious to know what had become of Chestnut Chink. Had he rejoined the men from Brace Box; had he been slain by the outlaws; was he their ally; was he wandering by himself? So Neville questioned, when he turned his thoughts from himself; but he got no answer.

Only, after the party had traveled some distance, two men had joined it; and held a hasty, whispered conversation with the leader. Perhaps it related to the fugitive. It did not seem to be very pleasant, nor very alarming. At the end Cyril dismissed them with a peremptory gesture, sending them back on the trail. They had not rejoined the party when the halt was made.

Some hours passed, and the darkness came down upon the camp. Neville, having had one hand set at liberty long enough to masticate his supper, wondered if, after all, Cyril could be as bad as he seemed; and if so, how soon he would be enlightened.

Hardly had he asked the question when the answer came, after a fashion. Cyril and two of his men escorted a stranger into his presence.

"Ah, Cousin Neville, I am sorry that you have to be so uncomfortable, but as I cannot trust you to come to your senses in a reasonable time, I have to do more tying and less watching. Allow me to make you acquainted with Reverend Leonidas Bear, who has just arrived from Bed Rock. I hope you can amuse him while I get our dear Viola ready for the ceremony."

He left them together then, and Neville looked at the creature with a disgust that was somewhat mingled with amazement. Could this man be a minister?

"Sorry to meet you here and under such circumstances," snuffled the man, understanding the gaze that was fixed upon him, and winking his bleared eyes to clear them somewhat of the moisture that lingered there.

"I have been unfortunate in my life, and have had foes, sir, foes. They helped to drag me down until it was a question, sir, whether I would ever rise again. But I am emerging—I begin to feel my footing. I have regained the confidence of my fellow mortals, am now a justice of the peace, and one day will go back, sir, rehabilitated in the sight of the world."

"And as a preparatory act you are here, the confidant of a mountain outlaw, and pledged to do his vile work?"

"My young friend, with me it is a case of necessity; therefore, why should I not submit gracefully. Having been once under a cloud, though of an entirely different nature, I naturally feel some sympathy for erring mortals who seem to have been forced into temporary retirement. I do not judge them harshly, and I sympathize with you. Am I not doing my duty?"

Leonidas was very far from being a Spartan! It was evident that unless he was bad as the worst, he had a respectful fear of Captain Gadley, and did not intend to imperil his life, asserting his manhood.

"Why, you hound!" exclaimed Neville, in hot wrath.

"If my hands were loose I'd choke you where you stand. If you take part or lot in this vilest of all vile plots you should be flayed alive, and roasted over a slow fire."

"And, my dear young friend, that is about what would be done with me if I did not. I am a captain, sir, like yourself. They came, sir, two outlaws, perhaps, but men who would not be denied, to my humble cabin, where, sir, law and religion are alike dispensed, and at the point of the pistol—of the pistol, sir, they dragged me away. I do not profess to be immaculate; but I hope, sir, I understand enough to take care of my own interests. I have been warned not to accept as gospel your wild ravings. I have been told that you came hither hungering and thirsting for the life of your own cousin, and that you had become almost a maniac because your schemes were balked. I refuse to listen to your uncharitable aspersions. It is largely at the request of a lady, that I consented to take part in what I admit seems to me to be a somewhat irregular proceeding. I begin, sir, to respect the young lady for her good taste. A road-agent who is a gentleman is better than a man who is a ruffian. I make allowance for your jealousy and disappointment, but I refuse to listen longer to your ravings, and I hope I will not long be compelled to undergo the indignity of your presence."

The queer little man turned away, and left Neville not a whit less wrathful, but full of wonder whether he was not more deserving of pity than wrath. Could it be that Viola was mad enough to consent to or desire such a sacrifice? If so, then she was scarcely worthy of the risks he had so cheerfully been willing to run.

If he could have been present at the interview between his cousins, he would have heard enough to satisfy even his jealous soul.

Viola had been sitting hopelessly in semi-darkness long enough to have every nerve wind itself up to its utmost tension. Few young ladies were there, of her age, who could be cooler, or had better control over their nerves; but her imprisonment was beginning to tell upon her, especially since she had found out for herself how absolutely helpless he was to make her escape.

"Well, cousin, dear, are you ready?" Cyril asked, as, stepping lightly forward, he placed himself, before she knew it, boldly in her presence.

"For what?" she answered, trying to speak with sternness.

"For our bridal, of course. The boys are all ready, drawn up in line. The parson is waiting. Even Neville, our well beloved cousin, has condescended to be here, to grace our nuptials with his presence. I met him with a guard of honor and escorted him into camp. All things and everybody seem to be ready, save you."

"Cyril North, are you mad? How else could you dare even to think of such a thing! Such a farce would not be binding. You would only be laying up for yourself punishment and wrath in the future. Pause, before it is too late. Do you think that Neville, even, would know rest or sleep until your punishment was complete?"

"Neville is a secondary matter in this affair! When he has been initiated into our ways and habits, I imagine he will thereafter attend strictly to his own business, and let mine alone. You seem to be wasting a great deal of virtuous indignation over me, and my plots and plans, past, present and to come. I was letting you severely alone; why in the name of Heaven didn't you two return the compliment?"

"Ask your own guilty conscience that question, Cyril North."

"So I did; and got a straight answer. While I lived you could not enter into the full enjoyment of that snug little fortune that was rightly mine; therefore it was necessary that I should die. And you, the delicate woman I once adored, aided by the one man I hate, set out to hound me down."

"I intend to checkmate you. I intend through you to possess that fortune. I intend to make you my wife. If the ceremony here, to-night, is not good enough we'll have it repeated with all desired variations."

"One moment, Cyril. How do you know that we came to hound you down? If we did, upon what charge?"

"Thanks. You don't suppose I care to answer such a leading question. As being Captain Gadley, perhaps. Enough of this. I am talking very straight now—with the bark on, as they say in the West. As my wife you cannot bear witness against me; how am I to make you such? Will you show your good sense by promising to behave during the services, or must I first begin a gentle pressure? You cannot escape; why not then be reasonable? If you try to balk me, I swear our hands will be joined over Neville's dead body, and the ceremony go on just the same. Answer."

"I answered you long ago; once and for all time. Let Neville look to his own safety if needs be. I purchase it by no such sacrifice as that."

"The worst it is, then!" sternly said the man; and yet there was a quaver in his voice that Viola had never heard there before.

"I have sworn, and keep my oath. Ho, there, Number Six! Light the torches and bring in the whole procession! The doors are open, and it is time for the performances to begin."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

OREGON CRACKS HIS WHIP AT THE GRAND FINALE.

NUMBER SIX, in the absence of the lieutenant, seemed fully competent to take the place of second in command.

He had already received full instructions, and so need no explanations when Cyril North gave his orders.

At the opening to the cave, and just outside, a fire was burning. In the shadow of the rocks a guard was stationed, to prevent any intrusion that should be a surprise. The only routes into the nook were already guarded by vigilant sentinels.

Two of the outlaws marched between them the reluctant Leonidas; while two more brought the unwilling Neville.

The half-dozen torches that were thrust into crevices of the rocks made the little cave almost as light as day. The apartment was perhaps thirty feet in length and breadth. For the first time Viola could see its bare extent. Her eyes roved around its full circumference, and she satisfied herself that no friendly forms could be lurking there, in the shadow.

Then she turned her glance toward Neville. He did not look like one who had lost all hope. He nodded encouragingly, though the move-

ment was checked by a sudden grasp of the jailer who held him prisoner. Viola did not believe that he knew the fate in store for him, and she feared to look longer at him lest it should shake her own nerve. She could die herself—probably would die—but it seemed even harder for her to doom him.

"No nonsense, now!" exclaimed Cyril, harshly.

"I have less time to waste than perhaps you think. This is the lady, Mr. Bear. You have desired, in view of the seeming irregularity of affairs, to have her assurance that she acts of her own free will. She will tell you that, and then you will proceed with the service."

He saw that Viola was watching him intently, as if she would read his soul, and he made a covert gesture that turned her eyes to Neville.

The two outlaws that had held him had fallen back a step, and stood with their revolvers poised at his head, even while they watched their captain for a signal. All was ready to carry into execution the savage threat by which he had backed his orders.

"A thousand times, no!" she burst out.

"You want to gain the fortune that would have been yours had you been worthy; you want to win that other one that belongs to me; but most of all you want to save your wicked neck from the gallows. You murdered our aunt with poison, and I am the only living witness; the only living being who can swear how you crept into the house that night and gave her the drug that worked her death. Hear, all! Some day one of you may be willing to speak. I charge him with that murder. I came out here to find him whom the law could not find; to avenge by the law the foulest crime of the year! I can die—but no power on earth, or below, can make me his wife, or save him from punishment for his crimes. That is my answer. Now, beware! If the law and the rope fail, and I live, one day or another the chance will come, and I will slay you with my own hand!"

To her surprise Cyril stood with folded arms, and uttering no word of protest. His face was pale—or so to her seemed—and his jaws were clinched resolutely together. Outside of that he gave no sign that he was listening until she ceased.

Then he spoke, but in a low, concentrated tone:

"Bring that cur around, boys, and force him on his knees here, right here. And you, Bear, step forward. Go on with your work, man. You're not the kind to refuse; but if you do your brains will spatter the bride elect, and we'll hunt for a more complaisant man. Quick! How is it?"

"This way!" exclaimed the Reverend Leonidas, leaping lightly to one side, his hands filling with revolvers, and covering Cyril as he spoke:

"Stand by me, boys! He is playing you foul, and he tried to kill me. I'll run this thing; and, for the first, Cyril North, move an inch and you die. You had your shot back there and missed; when I take mine you drop."

The two men that had been acting as guards over the supposed Leonidas—the two to whom had been intrusted the task of securing his presence—fell back at the same time; and their actions said that they meant to stand by the speaker. Of the rest of the outlaws a couple promptly followed the same lead, while the others seemed too much surprised to act.

"What nonsense is this, Helen?" began Cyril.

"What do you mean by your mad talk? Why this masquerade?"

"It means that after I had helped you in your dirty work; after I had risked my life to bewilder your enemies, capture your foes, save you from the hounds of the law, and the avenging bullet of the man you had harmed beyond redemption; after I had beaten the best men of Brace Box, and marched with a muzzle in my ear to lead the hounds into an ambush, you tried to murder me because I was in the way. You would have deserted me, your own lawful wife, to fool this girl with your fraud. It is fortunate that I am an adept at disguise. When I met the real Leonidas Bear on the way hither, I heard from his attendants your purpose, and very different it was from the one you told to me. I brought the boys back under my authority, and assumed his clothes and character, coming here to see how far you would go. This is my headquarters, this is my gang, formed by myself. I am Captain Gadley, the only true and authentic king of the mountains. I take back the power I delegated to you, and hold you for treason to our best interests. If law and order cannot do you justice we'll see what the rope of the road-agent can accomplish. Good-by, Chestnut Chink, the lad that fooled the best of them, and learned where to strike to draw blood! Good-by, Helen Morrison, whose brother Paul waits for her in the ravine below! Good-by the false Cyril North, that sometimes acted for the falsar. Good-by everything but Captain Gadley! And now take him away, some of you, and I'll look after these prisoners myself. As Cyril's only lawful wife, we happen to be in some sort related, though I don't know that I love them any the more."

"Hurrah for Queen Helen!" shouted one of the outlaws, and the rest joined in. The bloodless revolution was over.

There was no mistaking the woman for anything but what she was, as she poured out her jealous wrath in words that were as true as they were burning.

And yet Cyril seemed neither maddened nor subdued, and there was a cold smile on his white face as she ceased.

"All those heroics weigh but little with me now. Can't you understand that I hate Neville and love Viola? I swore I would kill the one and make the other my wife."

"I would have kept my oath—I would hardly have thought of letting the fugitive wife whose husband once fell before my pistol as I dropped to his, stand between me and my aims, even if I did go through the farce of a marriage when a befooled court had set her free."

"But fate was too strong for me. Last night Rollins drew on me; and when he draws he always kills. His bullet bored me through and through. I've been dying by inches all day, though I barely knew it. I would scarcely care to leave you behind—you, my evil genius—to enjoy the wealth that waits for Cyril North. I leave my love with Viola; but you and Neville—go out of the dew!"

Killer Rollins himself, never drew quite so quickly. The quiet, subdued tones had deceived them all, and even Helen was no longer on guard. First, he fired at her; and then, wheeling as the hammer raised, he threw up his hand to cover Neville.

A second shot echoed through the vaulted chamber; but Neville, who had never flinched, remained unharmed, while the revolver dropped from Cyril's shattered fingers.

"Not this time—some other time," muttered Merry May, as she recoiled her smoking weapon, but her voice was drowned by the harsher tones of Oregon:

"Hands up, all! The game's ag'in' yer; an' by ther rollin' wheels, ther first one ez moves a shooter bites lead! Steady, boys! Keep yer men covered, an' shoot ef yer hev to."

A wild cry arose. Oregon and Merry May were not alone. Dave Dunn and the Brace Box contingent were with them, and so were Solid Sam and his pards. Before the Sport with the Scar spoke each man had covered an outlaw, and now that the latter looked around, they saw nothing but death in resistance.

"One minnit, one holy minnit, pards!" said Number Six, holding his hands high above his head, and stepping a pace forward.

"We may ez well be shot now ez hung to-morrer; but I ain't sure we can't make it interestin'. What do yer want with us? I don't reckon the bosses will have much use for us after this, an' if you've got half sense we may come to terms."

"Piney Allen, you talk sense by the cord," retorted Oregon.

"It's the bosses we're after. We don't know much against you unless it is that you're in blamed bad company. We do want to clean out the mountains so it'll be safe for a white man, with a dollar in his pocket, to go over them. Gadley's Gang can't loaf 'round hyer, above ground."

"But if you mean ter git, why lay down yer arms an' go. Some other camp, that's got more time, can hang you."

Without a word, Number Six dropped his weapons on the floor, and moved out through the doorway, the men all following suit. Only Cyril and his wife, the woman who posed in Brace Box as Mrs. Morrison and Chestnut Chink—remained behind.

Cyril was a valuable captive, but he was slipping from their fingers fast. The Killer's bullet had done its work well, though the perversity of the man had rendered the result certain. The bullet that Merry May had fired, just in time to save Neville North's life, hastened the end a little, but that would have been just as sure without it. Neville, who, of course, had been loosened, took Viola's hand in his and led her away. Neither cared to see him die.

Merry May, a woman in spite of herself, stood by the side of the queen of the outlaws, and would have examined what sort of wound had come from Cyril's revolver, but Oregon brushed her away.

"Yonder is your pris'ner, Cyril North. Ez I git a share somewhere I guess this one's mine. If I don't git back, I want you, Dave, ter hustle these lambs into Brace Box, an' I'll see you in ther mornin'. Now, git back all, an' let me pass."

He lifted the form of the wounded woman and flung it across his shoulder; then strode out of the cave, still carrying one of his revolvers with the hammer back, ready for what might come; and they saw him no more that night.

If Cyril North did not expiate on the gallows the murder that Viola had vowed to bring home to him, her chase caused his death.

Of his wife who hated her former spouse so deeply, nothing more was heard than the few words of Oregon, when he came back the next day.

"Yes, she's livin', an' Paul, that brother of

hern, is nursin' her. I guess she won't die this time. She's wicked ez ther wu'st, but somehow ther scar on my face she brought me ain't half ez deep ez ther scar on my heart. I hope I'll never see her ag'in, but—I dunno."

How it happened that Oregon and his aides were so opportunely on the spot is not hard to guess. He and Merry May had waited for Lanty McGuire, who joined them at last, bringing with him Solid Sam and his partner, whom he had found unguarded but trussed up in the very cave where Viola was falsely said to be confined. They were too late to assist at the ambushade, but they trailed the outlaws down—having met Dave Dunn and the other men from Brace Box. After dark they lassoed the sentinels, who were a shade too careless, and then made their charge just in time. The jealous fury of Queen Helen, and the vengeful hate of her spouse, were giving the outlaws something else to think about, and the rescuers entered unperceived.

Merry May explained it all to the two cousins, who were more or less shaken by their late rude experiences, thoroughly as Viola had thought they were nerved for the task before them. The feminine sport also added a word of warning.

"And now, my little friends, I don't think rustling in the West is your forte. If you'll take Merry May's advice, you'll set your faces toward the rising sun, and on the way only stop long enough to have the nearest justice or minister of the gospel unite your fates and fortunes. The Reverend Leonidas is not half so bad as the madam made him, and might serve at a pinch. Then, enjoy the good things the gods have given you, and let unaided justice take its course."

For fear the reader will be unable to guess, it may be added that the advice was taken, though the interesting ceremony was performed in a more congenial spot than the cabin of Leonidas Bear.

For the rest—it is scarcely worth while to explain or particularize how and when Helen masqueraded as Chestnut Chink, and as her husband, Cyril North. With some of their men to aid them they were brave in the very heart of Brace Box, and not afraid to put their fingers on its best men if they stood in the way. It was no pity that had caused the release of Oregon. There was a possibility of his being found too soon, while at large, he would surely follow Neville to the rope when some of the gang raised the cry.

Colonel "Killer" Rollins recovered in due season, Sam Ryan continued chief of the muscular division at Brace Box, and Charley Coldcard got back to town a day after the fair, to find that the ones who had tricked him were beyond the reach of his derringers. Merry May, who was an institution in the town for some time, consoled him by proposing a game of draw—and won his money with ludicrous ease.

And Oregon, the Sport with a Scar on his face, and another on his heart, took his wages and went his way.

THE END.

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